

# From Folklore to Literature: Utilising Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as a Teaching Resource for Romanian Cultural Education

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## Abstract

*Stoker's „Dracula” is not merely a tale of horror but a intricate interweaving of historical fact and Romanian folklore. The strigoi and nosferatu, while possibly perceived as mere relics of bygone superstitions, are integral facets of Romanian cultural identity. Their tales, replete with the wisdom and anxieties of a civilization, invite us to engage deeply with the narratives that have shaped and continue to influence a nation's collective psyche. It is this intricate dance between the real and the imagined, the living and the undead, that renders the study of Stoker's Dracula and its Romanian origins a compelling academic endeavor. For educators, the myths of the strigoi and nosferatu, when juxtaposed against Stoker's Dracula, offer a treasure trove of opportunities. They unveil a society's deep-seated beliefs, fears, and aspirations. Analyzing these tales provides insights into Romania's cultural, religious, and social mores, making them invaluable tools for cultural education. By deconstructing the origins and evolutions of these myths, students can be introduced to broader themes of life, death, societal values, and the interplay of indigenous and external religious influences.*

**Keywords:** cultural education, civilisation, Dracula, Romanian language, literature

## Rezumat

*Romanul „Dracula” scris de Bram Stoker nu este doar o poveste de groază, ci o împletire eterogenă de fapte istorice și folclor românesc. Miturile despre strigoi și nosferatu, deși percepuți ca simple relicve ale superstițiilor de demult, sunt părți integrante ale identității culturale românești. Aceste povești, în care se regălesc înțelepciunea și preocupările unei civilizații, ne îndeamnă să ne implicăm profund în relatări care au modelat și continuă să influențeze conștiința colectivă a unei națiuni. Acest dans complex între real și imaginar, între vii și morți, transformă din studiul lui Dracula al lui Stoker și al originilor sale românești o îndeletnicire academică fascinantă. Pentru profesori, miturile strigoilor și nosferatu, când sunt*

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*comparate cu Dracula lui Stoker, oferă multe oportunități educative. Ele ne dezvăluie convingerile, temerile și speranțele adânc înrădăcinate ale unei societăți. Prin deconstrucția originilor și evoluțiilor acestor mituri, obținem o înțelegere mai bună a culturii, religiei, obiceiurilor și tradițiilor din România, ceea ce le face foarte utile în diseminarea educației culturale.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** educație culturală, civilizație, Dracula, limba română, literatură

## Introduction

When Bram Stoker embarked on crafting „Dracula,” his utilization of Vlad III, commonly known as Vlad the Impaler (Vlad Țepeș in Romanian), as a template was more symbolic than literal. Stoker's Count Dracula, an immortal vampire with a penchant for the blood of the living, shares only superficial characteristics with Vlad III, notably the name and implied nobility. Stoker's engagement with historical sources was cursory, leading to a conflation of Vlad's authentic life events with the rich tapestry of vampire myths pervasive in Eastern European folklore.

The vampire, in Slavic legends, represented the antithesis of Christian virtues—undead beings that threatened the living and the moral order. Stoker's genius lay in grafting this established myth onto a historical figure known for his own transgressions against life and morality. This interweaving of fact and fiction yielded a character who was at once familiar yet distinctly other, grounded in reality yet belonging to the realm of the supernatural.

The legacy of Vlad III, post-Stoker's novel, underwent a metamorphosis. While Romanians continued to remember him as a pivotal figure in their national history, the global narrative became overwhelmingly dominated by the vampire archetype. Subsequent adaptations, whether in film, literature, or theater, further distanced Vlad from his historical roots, cementing his status as a mythical creature of the night.

The intertextual relationship between the historical Vlad III and Stoker's Count Dracula underscores the complexities of cultural transmission and adaptation. It serves as a poignant reminder of how history, when refracted through the lens of literature and popular culture, can spawn enduring myths that overshadow their very origins. The figure of Vlad the Impaler, trapped in this interstice between fact and fiction, challenges us to constantly interrogate the boundaries of historical knowledge and its representations.

While Bram Stoker may not have conducted exhaustive ethnographic studies into Romanian folklore, his engagement with its undead myths is evident. By blending the attributes of the strigoi and nosferatu and superimposing them onto the historical figure of Vlad III,



Stoker produced a character that resonated with the Gothic sensibilities of his readership, while still maintaining an air of exoticism tied to Romania's distant landscapes and rich traditions.

“Dracula,” when approached with both reverence and criticality, emerges as an invaluable tool in the pedagogical arsenal. It invites students into a world where history, folklore, and literature coalesce, and in doing so, illuminates depth of Romanian culture. By transcending its pages and delving into the real cultural context that informs it, educators can facilitate a transformative journey, one that fosters both cultural appreciation and critical engagement.

### **The Historical Tapestry – Vlad Țepeș and the Evolution of Dracula**

The quintessential vampire narrative, replete with shadowy castles, arcane rituals, and undead beings, has its genesis not in the annals of pure fiction, but is indelibly inked by the quill of history. Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula*, a figure steeped in dread and darkness, emerges not from a void, but from a complex matrix of historical circumstances, geopolitical contests, and cultural lore. While the sinister Count remains an emblem of the macabre in literary annals, it is imperative to deconstruct his origins and juxtapose his fantastical persona with the historical figure who lends him his nomenclature – Vlad III, frequently denominated as Vlad Țepeș. As Stoker's *Dracula* himself asserts, „Who was it but one of my own race who as Voivode crossed the Danube and beat the Turk on his own ground?” pointing to his historical roots. (Stoker, 2018:29)

Vlad III, often overshadowed by his literary counterpart, was a complex historical figure. Born in 1431 in Sighișoara, a scenic town that still stands in present-day Romania, he spent his formative years in a milieu of political intrigue. His father, Vlad II Dracul, was a member of the Order of the Dragon, a chivalric order dedicated to halting the Ottoman Empire's advances into Europe. The moniker „Dracul,” meaning „dragon,” was not merely an appellation but a testament to Vlad II's commitment to this cause:

In the Moldovan and Romanian languages the word *drakul* means „the dragon” or „demon nearly,” and it is used to describe a type of vampiric demon that possesses the body of a deceased person and animates it. Once the demon has possession of the corpse, it makes it walk around naked, carrying its COFFIN on its head while looking for humans to prey upon. Fortunately, if the burial shroud of the person is destroyed, the demon will lose its hold on the body. (Bane, 2010:54)



Vlad III's reign, punctuated by three distinct periods in power, was marked by both reformative governance and brutal methods of punishment. His legislative efforts to stabilize a tumultuous economy and ensure justice often ran parallel to his notorious impalements—a method he employed not merely for its lethality but for its psychological deterrent effect.

Vlad Țepeș, whose sobriquet 'the Impaler' emerges from his proclivity for using impalement as a form of punishment, occupied the throne of Wallachia during a particularly tumultuous period in the late Middle Ages. Far from the parasitic creature of the night, Vlad was a figure ensconced in the throes of realpolitik. Elizabeth Miller in „*Dracula: Sense & Nonsense*” points out that, „Vlad was of a very different character than the mythical Dracula, but certain traits and historical events from his life have contributed to the modern legend.” (Miller, 2000:47). His reign was characterized not just by the infamous episodes of cruelty, but more importantly, by his tenacious resistance against the encroachments of the Ottoman Empire. As noted by Florescu and McNally, Vlad's reputation for cruelty and his patronymic gave rise to the name of the vampire Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*: „In the eyes of the Wallachian peasants, as well as in the lines of the histories, this macabre episode helped establish Dracula's reputation for cruelty, and the mass punishment at Țirgoviște was in part responsible for creating his nickname, 'the Impaler,' which henceforth clung to his name.” (Florescu&McNally, 2009:117)

Wallachia, precariously positioned at the crossroads of great empires, became under Vlad a bulwark against Ottoman expansion, its prince employing an array of guerilla tactics, diplomatic maneuvers, and psychological warfare to check the advance of Sultan Mehmed II.

It's also crucial to understand the sociopolitical milieu of 15th-century Eastern Europe to contextualize Vlad's actions. Wallachia was a vassal state, constantly buffeted between the ambitions of the Ottoman Empire to the south and the Kingdom of Hungary to the north. Vlad's unyielding stance against the Ottomans, combined with his intricate game of alliances and betrayals, marked him as a figure of both admiration and dread. He was simultaneously a beacon of Christian resistance against the Muslim invaders and a potentate known for his ruthlessness.

Drawing from this background of historical facts, the multifaceted personality of Vlad served as a fecund ground for Stoker. While Stoker's *Dracula* imbibes some traits from the historical Vlad, such as his aristocratic lineage and his defiance against powerful enemies, the transformation of a historical prince into a blood-thirsty vampire is emblematic of the intricate process of literary creation. Theresa Bane, in her exploration of vampire myths, posits the fact that while Vlad Tepes



was a historical figure known for his impaling methods of torture, his legend was co-opted and transformed, ultimately fusing with ancient vampire myths to inspire Stoker's famous novel (Bane, 2010). Stoker amalgamates the real with the imagined, history with folklore, and the result is the construction of a narrative wherein the lines between the authentic and the fictional become deliciously, and hauntingly, blurred.

Yet, it would be reductionist to attribute the genesis of Count Dracula solely to Vlad Țepeș. While Vlad's historical prominence provided an impetus, Stoker was undoubtedly influenced by a melange of sources, ranging from Romanian folklore to his own Victorian sensibilities. Vlad, with his visceral method of punishing adversaries, became a potent symbol around which other folkloric elements coalesced. His transformation from a historical figure into a literary vampire becomes a testament to the dynamic interplay of history, legend, and artistic imagination.

The intricate relationship between Vlad Țepeș and Count Dracula showcases the fascinating ways in which history can be repurposed, reshaped, and retold. Stoker's literary genius lies not just in creating a gripping narrative but in his ability to seamlessly intertwine the annals of history with the threads of fiction. The resulting tapestry, with its chiaroscuro of fact and fantasy, remains a masterclass in intertextuality, reminding readers of the mutable boundaries between the historical and the mythical.

### **Folkloric Entwinements – Strigoi, Nosferatu, and the Creation of the Literary Vampire**

In the crucible of Gothic literature, where shadowy figures and uncanny landscapes meld seamlessly with evocative narratives, the conception of the vampire stands unparalleled in its allure. Yet, to consider Bram Stoker's Count Dracula as a *sui generis* creation, devoid of antecedents, would be a significant oversight. To genuinely appreciate the depth and complexity of Stoker's portrayal, one must traverse the winding labyrinth of folklore and mythology, particularly from the Romanian heartland. Herein lie the spectral traces of „strigoi” and „nosferatu”, entities steeped in ancient beliefs and superstitions, which, when weaved into Stoker's narrative fabric, endow it with an unparalleled depth and resonance.

The „strigoi,” as gleaned from the tableau of Romanian legends, is a liminal entity, caught in the interstice between life and death. Often regarded as souls of the departed who refuse the embrace of the afterlife, these restless spirits are believed to harbor a deep-seated animosity towards the living, visiting upon them a plethora of malefactions, from



sapping vitality to outright nocturnal predations. Their attributes, ranging from their nocturnal habits to their insatiable thirst for life force, find echoes in Stoker's portrayal of Dracula. Yet, Stoker does not present a verbatim reproduction of this folklore entity; rather, he deftly amalgamates its characteristics with broader literary and cultural nuances, creating a more complex and multidimensional antagonist. Delving further into the characteristics and representations of the enigmatic nature of this entity,

A vampiric REVENANT from Romania, strigoiu appears whenever someone speaks its name aloud. Described as looking like a redheaded woman, a strigoiu will usually take up residence in an abandoned house. The only way to destroy this vampire is to nail it to the bottom of its COFFIN to keep it in the ground or to burn the REVENANT to ashes. Not as dangerous as its female counterpart, the male of this species is called a strigoiul. Uncommon for a vampire, the strigoiul will gather together and hunt in packs. The same method of destruction that is used to kill a strigoiu will not work on a strigoiul. The death of the male requires that its heart be removed and cut in half. Then GARLIC must be placed in its mouth and an iron nail driven through its head. (Bane, 2010:129)

This intricate portrayal of the „strigoi” not only enriches our understanding of Romanian folklore but also emphasizes the intricate interplay between folklore and the broader literary landscape.

Similarly, the term „Nosferatu” is emblematic of the undead — those who defy the ultimate finality of death, existing in a grotesque parody of life. This Romanian nomenclature resonates with ancient fears of the unknown and the unnatural, of beings that do not fit neatly into the established cosmological order. The nosferatu, like the strigoi, disturbs the demarcations between life and death, a thematic concern which Stoker astutely exploits to craft a narrative that simultaneously fascinates and repels. By embodying characteristics of the nosferatu in Dracula, Stoker not only pays homage to the rich folkloric traditions of Romania but also taps into universal anxieties about mortality, the afterlife, and the unknown. As we traverse the annals of history and folklore, the nosferatu reminds us of humanity's perennial struggle with understanding the unknown and confronting its deepest fears. The entity's integration into literature underscores its universality, a reflection of collective apprehensions that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries:

Across central and eastern Europe, the *nosferat* (“plague carrier”) is perhaps the best – known species of all the vampires, considered by many to be the quintessential traditional vampire. There are several ways a



person can become a nosferat, such as being born the seventh son of a seventh son, being born with a caul, the mother not eating any SALT during her pregnancy or having the misfortune of looking upon a vampire while pregnant, being born an illegitimate stillborn child to parents who are also of illegitimate birth, or having died the victim of a nosferat attack. (Bane, 2010:110)

Yet, the folkloric inspirations for Dracula do not operate in isolation. Stoker's genius lies in his ability to harmoniously intertwine these Romanian mythologies with a broader European vampire mythos. From the Slavic tales of the „upir” (Barber, 1988.) to the Greek legends of the „vrykolakas” (Danforth, 1997), Europe is replete with stories of undead entities with a penchant for human blood. Stoker's Count Dracula emerges from this intricate canvas of regional myths and legends, a syncretic creation that encapsulates the fears, anxieties, and superstitions of an entire continent (Leatherdale, 2001).

Furthermore, by integrating these folkloric elements into his narrative, Stoker not only crafts a compelling tale but also engages in a subtle cultural dialogue. He presents a microcosm of the broader cultural exchanges that defined 19th-century Europe. Dracula, as a novel, becomes a crossroads of sorts, where Eastern European myths intersect with Western literary sensibilities, resulting in a narrative that is both universally appealing and deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts.

In a broader literary context, Stoker's utilization of folklore serves to authenticate his narrative. By grounding his fantastical tale in real-world legends and beliefs, he imbues it with a semblance of plausibility. The reader, even when confronted with the supernatural, finds threads of familiarity in the narrative, thanks to its anchorage in genuine cultural lore.

Bram Stoker's Dracula, while a product of literary imagination, is deeply entwined with the rich realm of folklore. The figures of the strigoi and the nosferatu, hailing from the depths of Romanian mythology, become foundational pillars in the construction of the iconic Count. This synthesis of folklore with literary creativity not only attests to Stoker's masterful narrative skills but also underscores the novel's position as a monumental work of intertextual art. By weaving together the threads of myth, legend, history, and imagination, Stoker offers readers a narrative that is as timeless as the undead count at its heart.

### **The Literary Landscape – Transylvania as a Liminal Space**

In the annals of Gothic literature, settings are seldom mere passive backgrounds; they pulsate with life, echoing the narrative's thematic



thrusts and often becoming characters in their own right. Such is the case with Stoker's rendition of Transylvania. While a cursory reading might pigeonhole this domain as just another exotic locale, a deeper exploration unveils a topography rife with layers of symbolism, narrative significance, and cultural connotations.

Stoker's Transylvania is a space replete with dichotomies, a threshold region that flirts incessantly with dualities. It is a liminal space, both in the geographical sense, straddling the East and West of Europe, and in the metaphysical sense, oscillating between the empirically known world and the shadowy domain of the supernatural. As the reader traverses this land through the eyes of Jonathan Harker, they're ushered into a realm where conventional binaries crumble, where diurnal realities mesh with nocturnal phantasms, and where the delineations between the empirical and the ethereal grow tantalizingly tenuous.

Stoker's portrayal of Transylvania is a masterclass in evoking the uncanny – that which is eerily familiar yet strangely foreign. The undulating landscapes, the archaic villages, and the towering Castle Dracula, all imbued with an aura of timelessness, construct a milieu that is palpably real yet imbued with an otherworldly mystique:

Beyond the green swelling hills of the Mittel Land rose mighty slopes of forest up to the lofty steeps of the Carpathians themselves. Right and left of us they towered, with the afternoon sun falling full upon them and bringing out all the glorious colours of this beautiful range, deep blue and purple in the shadows of the peaks, green and brown where grass and rock mingled, and an endless perspective of jagged rock and pointed crags, till these were themselves lost in the distance, where the snowy peaks rose grandly. Here and there seemed mighty rifts in the mountains, through which, as the sun began to sink, we saw now and again the white gleam of falling water. (Stoker, 2018:7)

The topography of Transylvania, punctuated by craggy peaks and veiled in perennial mist, mirrors the novel's thematic interplay of clarity and obscurity. This is a land where ancient customs persist, where superstitions aren't just tales whispered by candlelight but lived realities, and where the past, with its spectral tendrils, perennially intrudes upon the present.

But the geographical and temporal liminality of Stoker's Transylvania is further accentuated by its cultural liminality. This is a space that challenges the Victorian protagonist's and by extension, the reader's preconceived notions of the 'civilized' and the 'savage.' Transylvania, in the narrative, emerges as a confluence of cultures, a nexus where Eastern and Western sensibilities clash and commingle. The deeply





ingrained folkloric traditions, the cryptic warnings of villagers, the old-world charm juxtaposed against Harker's rational English demeanour — all serve to underline the cultural dissonance and the resultant tension.

Furthermore, this liminal space serves as an apt reflection of the Victorian psyche. The late 19th-century zeitgeist, marked by its faith in scientific rationality and its concomitant discomfort with the unknown, finds a resonant echo in the narrative's oscillation between the known and the unknown terrains of Transylvania. The very journey of Harker from England to Transylvania can be seen as emblematic of the Victorian expedition into the fringes of its own understanding, an exploration of its suppressed fears and latent desires. Transylvania, thus, is not just a geographic locale, but a psychological landscape, mirroring the tumultuous interplay of Victorian certainties and uncertainties.

In a meta-literary context, Transylvania as a liminal space also underscores the transformative power of literature itself. Just as Transylvania blurs boundaries, so does the act of reading, transporting one from the tangible reality to the realm of imagination. Stoker's narrative invites readers to step into this intermediary realm, to suspend disbelief, and to partake in a journey where the boundaries of fiction and reality, much like the boundaries of Transylvania, remain enchantingly indistinct.

Stoker's Transylvania is a testament to the evocative power of literary settings. It isn't just a passive tableau against which the drama of *Dracula* unfolds, but an active participant in the narrative, shaping its rhythms, influencing its characters, and encapsulating its thematic essence. This liminal space, with its rich representation of geographical, cultural, and psychological nuances, beckons readers to reconsider their understanding of boundaries, to question the dichotomies they take for granted, and to revel in the myriad shades of gray that lie between the stark black and white of conventional understanding.

### **Teaching Romanian Culture through the Intertextual Lens of *Dracula***

Bram Stoker's „*Dracula*” stands not merely as a pinnacle of Gothic literature, but as a kaleidoscope through which myriad facets of Romanian culture shimmer and refract. The novel, with its rich *mélange* of history, folklore, and literary artistry, presents educators with a unique opportunity – a portal, if you will, through which the vast and varied landscape of Romanian culture can be traversed and dissected in an academic setting. By navigating this intertextual terrain, one can illuminate the intricate intersections between fiction and fact, between



Stoker's imagination and the cultural tapestry that he so masterfully weaves into his narrative.

However, as Elizabeth Miller astutely observes in her seminal work, „*Dracula: Sense & Nonsense*,” „*Dracula*” is „a work of fiction and not a history book. Yet within its pages are many layers, hints, and echoes of the real history and folklore of Transylvania and Wallachia” (Miller, 2000:32). This observation underscores the need for a careful and considered pedagogical approach when employing „*Dracula*” as a teaching tool. While the novel is replete with cultural references and allusions, it is paramount to differentiate between Stoker's imaginative embellishments and the authentic cultural moorings from which they arise.

As Făurar argues, teaching methodologies „offer students the opportunity to improve their knowledge and ability to speak a foreign language, reinventing themselves in each case, interacting with others, transferring „acquisitions” in new contexts” (Faurar, 2018:110). This perspective is helpful in the context of using „*Dracula*” to explore Romanian culture, suggesting that educators can leverage the novel's narrative to foster a dynamic and interactive learning environment. Furthermore, Maria-Magdalena Lăpădat's observation that „transformation actually means the decisive transformation of social systems, a revolution in communication methodologies, both at the individual and social level” (M.M. Lăpădat, 2022:12), illuminates the broader implications of employing cultural literary works in educational settings. It suggests that by engaging with the novel's depiction of Romanian culture, educators and students alike participate in a transformative learning experience that challenges and expands their understanding of cultural and historical narratives.

The novel's portrayal of Dracula himself offers fertile ground for historical exploration. The malevolent count, while a work of fiction, bears the indelible imprint of Vlad Țepeș, the 15th-century Wallachian ruler. The quote „We are in Transylvania; and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things” poignantly captures the cultural dissonance and the sense of the 'other' that permeates Bram Stoker's „*Dracula*” (Stoker, 2018:20). It serves as a window into the novel's rich texture of historical and cultural juxtapositions, emphasizing the stark contrasts between the familiar and the foreign, the known and the unknown.

In *Dracula*, Stoker taps into the late 19th-century Western anxieties about the East and the unknown territories that lay beyond the map of 'civilized' Europe. Transylvania, as depicted in the novel, is not just a geographical region but a symbolic space — a frontier where the rationality of the West meets the mysteries and superstitions of the East.



This boundary is not just physical but also temporal, with Transylvania portrayed as a land where time seems to have stood still, bearing the weight of its medieval past in its customs, beliefs, and landscapes.

Count Dracula, the embodiment of this ancient and mysterious land, serves as a historical and cultural nexus in the story. His character is deeply enmeshed with the legacy of Vlad Țepeș, the 15th-century Wallachian ruler. Just as Vlad navigated the complexities of 15th-century geopolitics, facing challenges from both Western Europe and the encroaching Ottoman Empire, Dracula in the novel negotiates his existence in a world where his ancient ways clash with modernity. The quote underscores this friction. It suggests that while Jonathan Harker, an Englishman, may find many of Transylvania's ways strange and unsettling, they are a product of the region's unique history and cultural evolution. The distinction between „our ways” and „your ways” reflects the broader theme of the novel: the tension between the old world and the new, between tradition and modernity, and between the familiar and the foreign. Furthermore, by evoking the specter of Vlad Țepeș, Stoker anchors Dracula in a specific historical context, enriching the narrative with layers of real historical events and figures. Vlad's own reign was marked by his resistance against external forces, notably the Ottomans, and his methods — sometimes brutal — to preserve his rule and his people's ways of life.

Moreover, the novel's engagement with Romanian folklore, specifically the legends of the strigoi and nosferatu, provides a window into the rich folkloric traditions of the region. As Andrew Boylan notes, the Romanian countryside is steeped in legends that echo the themes of death and resurrection, themes that Stoker taps into with great effect (Boylan, 1997). By juxtaposing these authentic folk tales with Stoker's interpretations, educators can facilitate a nuanced dialogue on the processes of cultural adaptation and appropriation in literature.

Additionally, the geographical and cultural portrayal of Transylvania in the novel offers an avenue to explore Romanian geography, socio-cultural dynamics, and the complex interplay between the East and West. Stoker's evocative descriptions, such as his portrayal of the Borgo Pass or the local inhabitants' superstitious practices, can serve as a springboard to delve into the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the region.

One of the primary challenges in teaching a foreign language pertains to cultural differences. When faced with these cultural discrepancies, students „go into a socio-cultural shock that they must overcome as soon as possible to be able to integrate and socialize” (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2020:141). This insight is particularly relevant when



using 'Dracula' as a means to explore Romanian culture, emphasizing the importance of sensitivity and adaptability in addressing the cultural nuances presented in the narrative.

Moreover, „the teaching methods need to be alternated to keep alive the attention and interest of students in online courses” (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2022:137). This advice is crucial in the context of teaching Romanian culture through 'Dracula', where educators are tasked with keeping students engaged with the material in innovative and dynamic ways, especially in an online learning environment.

Stoian's assertion that „Education is one of the most important factors that define a society. It represents the starting engine for all the activities that run within each society” (Stoian, 2019:126), reinforces the significance of employing 'Dracula' in the educational exploration of Romanian culture, as well as highlighting the potential of the novel to not only educate students about Romania's rich cultural and historical heritage but also to inspire them to appreciate and engage with cultures other than their own.

Nowadays, „the educational environment confronts us with problem-solving situations as a matter of priority” (Bărbuceanu, 2022:183), underscoring the complexities and challenges inherent in teaching a second or foreign language. This reality makes the innovative use of literary texts like 'Dracula' all the more valuable, as they offer educators a versatile tool to address and navigate these challenges.

The resources associated with teaching Romanian as a second language are varied and complementary. They cater to different learning styles and contexts, thus ensuring a holistic approach to language learning: „these different learning styles clearly show that each learner has distinctive characteristics for the appropriation of knowledge” (Scorțan, 2021:142). This perspective underscores the importance of diversifying instructional strategies when teaching Romanian culture through 'Dracula', tailoring approaches to meet the unique needs of each student.

Laviniu Lapadat's statement reveals the multifaceted challenges faced by teachers in the field, further emphasizing the necessity for innovative, engaging, and culturally sensitive teaching methods: „Cultural differences, linguistic diversity, learner motivation, and resource constraints are but a few of the hurdles that foreign language teachers grapple with daily.” (L.C. Lăpădat, 2023a:253). His suggestion further points toward the ongoing need for pedagogical innovation and research in the realm of foreign language education, particularly in the context of teaching Romanian culture through literary works such as 'Dracula': „By integrating cultural elements into language learning, the Preparatory Year



program enables foreign students to engage more deeply with Romanian society, while also enriching the local community. It serves as a powerful testament to the myriad possibilities when education is approached as a tool for holistic personal and societal development.” (L.C. Lăpădat, 2023b:163)

Introducing students and readers to the atmospheric world of Bram Stoker's „Dracula” offers a unique gateway into exploring deeper facets of Romanian culture, its myths, and its historical challenges. As we explore the novel, certain passages resonate with larger questions about identity, belonging, and the clash of cultures. Consider the excerpt,

I longed in many ways to actually be with them. The very thought drove me mad. A terrible desire came upon me to rid the world of such a monster. [...] The sight seemed to paralyze me, and the shovel turned in my hand and glanced from the face, merely making a deep gash above the forehead. [...] The last glimpse I had was of the bloated face, blood-stained and fixed with a grin of malice which would have held its own in the nethermost hell. (Stoker, 2018:52)

The intensity of these words mirrors the tumultuous emotions of someone encountering something utterly alien, representing not just a confrontation with a fearsome vampire, but symbolizing the larger cultural clashes and misunderstandings that have historically pervaded perceptions of Eastern Europe. Such passages can act as a starting point in the classroom, sparking discussions about stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and the repercussions of misrepresenting or misunderstanding a culture.

Ultimately, Dracula's own introspection on fate and choice in the line, „We are all drifting reefwards now, and faith is our only anchor” (Stoker, 2018:316) is emblematic of Romania's struggle for autonomy and recognition on the European stage. Just as Dracula grapples with his destiny and choices, so too has Romania wrestled with its historical role in Europe, striving to assert its unique cultural identity amidst larger geopolitical currents. This quote can be employed to lead discussions on Romania's rich history, its resistance against empires, and its search for national identity.

## Conclusion

In essence, „Education is a critical aspect that outlines the progress of a society” (M.M. Lapadat, 2023:277), and teaching Romanian culture using „Dracula” as a lens is not about reinforcing the eerie myths or gothic tropes. Instead, it's about peeling back the layers of the narrative to reveal a rich mosaic of history, societal reflections, and cultural dialogues. The



narrative and its poignant lines are but doors that open onto the vast landscape of Romanian culture and history. Through a thoughtful exploration of these doors, educators can guide students towards a nuanced understanding of both the text and the culture it is indelibly linked to.

However, while celebrating the novel's cultural richness, it is essential to address and rectify any misconceptions or stereotypes it may perpetuate. As Carol Senf suggests, in the hands of Stoker, Romania becomes a space that represents the 'other' – a space that is simultaneously alluring and threatening. This portrayal, while offering narrative tension, risks marginalizing and exoticizing the very culture it seeks to depict (Senf, 1998).

Bram Stoker's „Dracula” is more than a classic of Gothic fiction; it's a complex blend of cultural symbols, though mixed with fictional elements and a touch of orientalism. Its lasting popularity worldwide presents a special chance for teaching and learning. For those interested in cultural studies and history, „Dracula” acts as both an entryway and a lens into Romanian culture, even as it skews and reshapes various aspects of it. Using the novel for educational purposes requires a balanced approach that appreciates its story while also looking beyond its misconceptions. To achieve this, „we use every resource at our disposal, both linguistic and cultural in order to help our guests and our learners transition towards a new world of learning whose principal gatekeeper is, in fact, our beloved Romanian language” (Lăpădat&Lăpădat, 2020:140).

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