



Bram Stoker and Henry Irving: Close Friendship or Unrequited Love?



*Was actor Henry Irving the inspiration for Bram Stoker's famed novel *Dracula*, and were their personal issues revealed in the book? Maybe, but sometimes a stake is just a stake.*

Bram Stoker, best known for his macabre masterpiece *Dracula*, spent much of his life as the manager of Sir Henry Irving, one of the most famous British actors of the 19th century. It is clear the two had a deep friendship, but the precise nature of their relationship has long been contested. Some say Irving was dominant and abusive in his veritable lordship over Stoker, suggesting that the sinister *Dracula* character was inspired by Stoker's secret hatred for his boss. Others contend that Stoker was a homosexual who siphoned his unrequited romantic feelings into sexually charged novels.

The Man Who Met His Idol

Stoker was born in Dublin, Ireland, on November 8, 1847. A sickly child, he barely left his bed until age seven. Yet, by the time he was a student at Trinity College Dublin, he was a star athlete and president of the philosophical society. Post-graduate employment saw him working for about ten years in the Irish Civil Service. Office drudgery didn't dampen Stoker's spirits, though—during this period, he wrote his first book, reviewed the theater for local newspapers, and became obsessed with Irving.

Then, in 1876, Stoker met his idol. Irving was acting in Dublin, and Stoker's review of his performance was so enthusiastic that Irving wanted to meet his admirer. The fateful meeting is recounted with great detail in Stoker's book *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, which he published in 1906, after Irving's death. At an early





gathering, Irving recited a poem, and Stoker proceeded to “burst into something like hysterics.” Irving was also overcome with emotion and left the room, returning with a photograph of himself on which he had written, “My dear friend Stoker, God bless you! God bless you!” Stoker remembered, “Soul had looked into soul! From that hour began a friendship as profound, as close, as lasting as can be between two men.”

But every spring love has its winter season. Literary historians have argued that the Irving-Stoker relationship was codependent and emotionally abusive. Irving was a world-famous actor; Stoker was an unknown novelist. Since age 18, Irving had traveled all over Great Britain, playing roles large and small. His big break finally came in 1874, when he played the title character in *Hamlet* at the famed Lyceum Theatre in London. His acting style was mesmerizing and unique—instead of the loud bantering and over-dramatic gestures to which theater audiences of the period were accustomed, Irving played his parts with quiet, refined dignity. In 1878, Irving became the manager of the Lyceum Theatre, and he recruited his new friend Stoker as his personal manager.

Stoker worked for Irving until Irving's death in 1905. During this period, the Lyceum flourished, and Stoker accompanied Irving on frequent tours abroad. While Stoker sang nothing but songs of praise for his comrade in *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, some who knew both men claimed that Irving was domineering and prone to dark moods. Stoker, however, did claim some success of his own while working for Irving. *Dracula* was published to moderate response and praise in 1897. The hypothesis that *Dracula* is loosely based on Irving is purely speculative, even though a few writers have made compelling cases. Stoker biographer Barbara Belford has claimed that *Dracula* is “bristling with repression and apprehension of homosexuality, devouring women, and rejecting mothers.” Literary critic Phyllis Roth wrote that the character of *Dracula* “acts out the repressed fantasies of the others.”

The Art of Repression

Although some may be reading a bit too much between Stoker's lines on that count, there is convincing evidence that he was a closeted homosexual. In his youth, Stoker idolized and corresponded with American poet Walt Whitman, who was famous for his liberal



attitude toward homosexuality. In one letter to Whitman, Stoker declared, “I would like to call you comrade and talk to you as men who are not poets do not often talk. . . . I know I would not be long ashamed to be natural before you. . . . you have shaken off the shackles and your wings are free. I have the shackles on my shoulders still—but I have no wings.”

A Wilde Situation

Some also believe that Stoker had a complex relationship with the openly homosexual playwright Oscar Wilde. In 1878, Stoker married the notoriously beautiful Florence Balcombe, who only a short time prior had been the beloved girlfriend of a young Oscar Wilde. There is little surviving documentation of the relationship between Wilde and Stoker, but historians argue the two men kept up icy social relations throughout their life and that Wilde was jealous of Stoker's marriage.

And then there was the famous Wilde sodomy trial of 1895, which resulted in Wilde spending two years in prison. Since *Dracula* was published in 1897, some historians have proposed that Stoker wrote the novel during the trial and funneled his complex feelings about homosexuality into the overly sexual book. But recent discoveries of Stoker's working notes on *Dracula* reveal that he began planning the book five years before Wilde's trial.

What is clear is that Stoker was one of the only artists in Wilde's circle who did not vocally come to his defense during the trials. Essays Stoker wrote on censorship suggest that he was morally opposed to “loose” sexual codes, feeling instead that writers should censor their work so as not to propagate immorality. In “The Censorship of Stage Plays,” Stoker wrote that “we do not allow to the human what we overlook in other animals. Hence arise such words. . . . [as] *reticence*, *taste*, and the whole illuminative terminology based on higher thought and ambition for the worthy advance of mankind.”

Thus, while Stoker may have been in love with Irving, it seems unlikely that he ever acted on his feelings, despite conjectures about the late-night sessions the two frequently held at the Lyceum Theatre. Whatever the sexual overtones of their relationship, Stoker held a deep love for Irving. Whatever the inspiration for the delectably sexual *Dracula*, it is a novel that has lived for more than a century in the popular imagination.