

# The Significance of Colours in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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## Abstract

The article provides a corpus-assisted analysis of colour terms in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. The aim of the analysis is to establish whether colours contribute to the novel's Gothic mood. Colours can be used to evoke specific atmospheres; they also bear symbolic meanings. This makes them a powerful option for enhancing the mood of a Gothic horror novel. The analysis indicates that white, red and black are the most important colours in *Dracula*, appearing in distinct patterns and contexts.

**Keywords:** Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, colour symbolism, Gothic novel, corpus stylistics

## INTRODUCTION

Colours are a powerful means for evoking specific moods, making them particularly useful in genres like Gothic fiction. This article examines colour terms in the Gothic novel *Dracula* (first published in 1897) to establish whether they contribute to a distinct stylistic effect. The corpus-assisted analysis focuses on three colours commonly associated with vampires – red, black and white – but also examines other colours that might be less typically mentioned in relation with them.

Stoker's *Dracula*, a story about defeating a vampire, belongs to the Gothic horror genre, making it an interesting subject for stylistic research due to the moods it evokes. According to Cuddon (308), works belonging to the Gothic genre feature supernatural elements, dark and barren landscapes, forests, ruins and castles; they also include supernatural creatures or apparitions, such as demons, witches and ghosts. Additionally, authors of Gothic novels like to include "descriptions of picturesque scenery" (Cuddon 535). These elements can also be found in Stoker's *Dracula*. The events of the novel unfold in places generally considered dark and threatening, such as the count's mysterious castle, graveyard, and asylum. Foucault (24) refers to such places as heterotopias, which are "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted". In *Dracula*, the asylum and graveyard are examples of heterotopias. According to Foucault (25), an asylum is a heterotopia of deviation, a place for individuals deviating from societal standards, and the cemetery is a strange place "unlike ordinary cultural spaces". Therefore, some settings in *Dracula* are inherently places in which individuals experience unsettling and difficult situations. Combined with supernatural characters and events, one of the Gothic novel's characteristics is crafting a special atmosphere of suspense, which can be achieved in various ways.

Wolstenholme (6) notes that "Gothic fiction is frequently described as having a particularly 'visual' quality". Consequently, the use of descriptive language that results in a distinct mood is a viable research topic. This article focuses on one of the many possible ways of conveying visuals, i.e. by emphasising colour. Vampires, creatures found in various folklores, can be closely associated with three colours in particular: red because of the blood that they drink, black because they are creatures of darkness who avoid sunlight, and white because of their ghostly pallor and sharp white teeth.

## COMMON MEANINGS OF COLOURS

Colours can have a literal, metaphorical, metonymical and symbolic meaning (Čeh Steger 101). One of their basic functions is enabling us to distinguish objects and phenomena from one another, but they also spark imagination and intuition, influence people's mental and physical states, reflect emotions and create particular atmospheres (Čeh Steger 91). The latter function is the most significant one for the analytical section of this article.

Previous research has established common meanings associated with individual colours. Black conventionally represents death, sorrow, evil and foreignness but also the non-negative characteristic of humbleness; it is the contrast of white – if black is darkness, white is light (Butzer and Jacob 386). Chevalier and Gheerbrant (90) note that the symbolic meaning of black is usually negative. White relates to innocence, virginity, holiness and virtue but also death (Butzer and Jacob 481); moreover, it is considered a colour of transitioning or crossing over, making it a useful element of rituals associated with death and rebirth (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 52). Red is commonly associated with life force, passion, power, blood and fire (Butzer and Jacob 353) as well as the devil, anger and embarrassment (Ferber 169). Yellow signifies light, life, envy, suffering and transience (Butzer and Jacob 147); it can also be a sign of disease (Ferber 244). Purple is associated with transitions, balance, expensiveness and royalty as well as concealed or arcane parts of reality (Butzer and Jacob 466). Blue is connected with melancholy, death, mysteriousness, transcendence, infinity, the sky and the sea (Butzer and Jacob 53). Green is mainly associated with nature (Ferber 89); symbolically, it is connected to life, hope, inexperience, envy and demonic forces (Butzer and Jacob 168). Grey is related to the uncanny, melancholy, age and liminal situations (Butzer and Jacob 163). Orange can represent balance since it is a mix of yellow and red, and brown is mainly connected to the colour of soil (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 413, 512).

Well-established meanings of colours thus show that they could easily be incorporated into the Gothic context in which they would create a specific mood or atmosphere. This is particularly so in the case of black and white as polar opposites representing darkness and light as well as red as the colour of blood. Additionally, blue and green bear meanings connected to the supernatural, which is the main antagonist force in *Dracula*.

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis was based on concordance searches containing basic words for individual colours (black, white, red, grey, blue, green, yellow, pink, purple, orange and brown)<sup>1</sup> using the CLiC corpus (Mahlberg et al.). Instances where colours are part of a proper name (such as *the Black Sea* or *Bethnal Green*, an area in London) were eliminated, since these do not contribute to the mood of the novel. Corpus search results for each colour were reviewed and analysed with a focus on establishing potential patterns in the occurrence of individual colours.

## ANALYSIS

There are 29 relevant results in the concordance search for the term *black*. The colour appears in two significant patterns of usage. Firstly, black is used to describe a person, specifically their clothing and appearance. Secondly, it is used to describe a place, particularly a landscape or a building. Dracula is, as per Jonathan Harker's observation, dressed in all black ("clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour"; Stoker 18), and his castle has "tall black windows" from which "came no ray of light" (Stoker 17). That black is Dracula's signature colour is also corroborated by other characters, such as Dr Seward, who immediately recognizes the count when seeing him for the first time ("a tall, thin man, all in black"; Stoker 267).

A poignant example of black contributing to the suspense is in the section of the novel in which Harker and his companions chase Dracula in the Transylvanian wilderness to kill him: "The moonlight suddenly failed, as a great black cloud sailed across the sky" (Stoker 262). Black collocates with clouds in a few other examples, such as when Harker is being driven to the count's castle for the first time ("just then the moon, sailing through the black clouds, appeared behind the jagged crest of a beetling"; Stoker 16) and when Mina Harker is looking for Lucy Westenra, who is wandering outside at night ("There was a bright full moon, with heavy black, driving clouds"; Stoker 86). Another instance of black as a contributor to fear and suspense is in Mina's narrative as she describes waking up frightened in the middle of the night ("All was dark and silent, the black shadows thrown by the moonlight seeming full of a silent mystery of their own"; Stoker 240). The examples listed convey a sense of unease.

A search for *white* yields 102 concordance results. Salient mentions of this colour relate to fear, teeth and the appearance of the vampires. White often pre-modifies nouns or nominal phrases for articles of clothing (e.g. "white linen shirts"

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1 An influential study on the colour vocabulary in various languages was conducted by Berlin and Kay. The analysis in this article was done using only the basic eleven colour terms used in English.

and “white shirt-sleeves”; Stoker 7). In some of these examples, the whiteness of the clothing is juxtaposed with red, possibly symbolising the clash between innocence and passion (“Her white nightdress was smeared with blood”; Stoker 262; “When she raised it, his white night-robe was stained with blood where her lips had touched”; Stoker 264).

White is notably used to emphasise the ghostly appearance of the vampires. There is a section in which Mina recalls seeing a “white figure” (Stoker 86) but is unsure of what it was. Dr Seward also sees a mysterious “white streak, moving between two dark yew-trees” (Stoker 185). White teeth are one of the signature features of the novel’s vampires (“All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips”; Stoker 38; “the sharp white teeth glinted in the moonlight”; Stoker 259), particularly of Dracula (“The mouth, so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth”; Stoker 20). Wolves, which are under the count’s command, also have dangerous white teeth (“I saw around us a ring of wolves, with white teeth and lolling red tongues”; Stoker 16).

Some characters in the novel are often frightened. Examples such as the following suggest an intense fear: “Mrs Harker grew ghastly white” (Stoker 314), “she stopped and grew white, and whiter still” (Stoker 321; note the intensification with a graded form of the adjective immediately after the base form). In comparison with black, white conveys a Gothic atmosphere in the environment less frequently. However, some examples can still be found, such as “There was in the room the same thin white mist that I had before noticed” (Stoker 266) and “white, wet clouds, which swept by in ghostly fashion” (Stoker 74).

Red, the third typical vampiric colour, appears in 69 relevant concordances. It most notably co-occurs with nouns denoting body parts, specifically lips, eyes and skin. Examples include the following: “the lamplight fell on a hard-looking mouth, with very red lips” (Stoker 13); “the fair cheeks blazing red with passion” (Stoker 39); “something long and dark with red eyes” (Stoker 93); “the Count’s evil face, the ridge of the nose, the red eyes, the red lips, the awful pallor” (Stoker 234); “His white face looked out of the mist with His red eyes gleaming” (Stoker 260). The vampires’ bites also leave behind red dots or marks (“two little red points like pin-pricks”; Stoker 88; “little white dots with red centres”; Stoker 91; “a red mark on her throat”; Stoker 116).

When contributing to atmosphere, the adjective *red* often appears in the close proximity of words denoting light (“the red light was thrown over on the East Cliff and the old Abbey, and seemed to bathe everything in a beautiful rosy glow”; Stoker 89). Red in the environment can evoke positive feelings (“how humanising to see the red lighting of the sky beyond the hill”; Stoker 195) or negative ones (“And then a red cloud, like the colour of blood, seemed to close over my eyes”;

Stoker 260). After the final fight with Dracula, the sky is red because of the setting sun, symbolically signifying the end of the struggle (“The Castle of Dracula now stood out against the red sky, and every stone of its broken battlements was articulated against the light of the setting sun”; Stoker 350).

Grey, the colour derived from black and white, conveys negative or melancholy moods, as evident from the following evocative passage: “Everything is grey—except the green grass, which seems like emerald amongst it; grey earthy rock; grey clouds, tinged with the sunburst at the far edge, hang over the grey sea, into which the sand-points stretch like grey fingers” (Stoker 71). There are also two instances in which the colour is a metaphor for conveying sadness (“a grey look”; Stoker 268) or age (“her husband’s grey head”, Stoker 286). In total, this colour appears in 21 concordances.

Green evokes exclusively positive images in this novel. All 14 relevant occurrences are from sentences describing a beautiful natural environment completely different from the count’s dark castle (“Before us lay a green sloping land full of forests and woods”; Stoker 10; “I could see the green grass under the trees spangled with the fallen petals”; Stoker 10; “The valley is beautifully green”; Stoker 61).

There are 14 relevant search results for blue. The colour most often appears in conjunction with the noun *flame*. This is connected with the folk belief explained to Harker by the coachman, who is, in reality, Dracula himself; it is believed that “on a certain night of the year—last night, in fact, when all evil spirits are supposed to have unchecked sway—a blue flame is seen over any place where treasure has been concealed” (Stoker 23–24). Blue flames appear when the count is using his powers (“I saw a faint flickering blue flame”; Stoker 15). Van Helsing, who assists with killing Dracula, prepares several tools and weapons for the undertaking, one of them being “gas which burned at fierce heat with a blue flame” (Stoker 199). In the novel, blue light generally bears negative connotations relating to the supernatural, unlike yellow light, which is portrayed as a positive natural force.

Yellow appears only in six instances. It mainly conveys the colour of light, thus contributing to the atmospheric visuals evoked by the text (“the beautiful expanse, bathed in soft yellow moonlight”; Stoker 35; “the yellow moonlight, flooding in through the diamond panes”; Stoker 36; “It is now not far off sunset time, and over the snow the light of the sun flow in big yellow flood”; Stoker 338). These examples are combined with kinaesthetic imagery of the light flooding or flowing through a setting, suggesting that it is a soothing and positive phenomenon, unlike the dark.

Although they are mentioned very infrequently, i.e. in five concordances combined, pink and purple contribute to a pleasant atmosphere in the following examples: “the snowy mountain-top still held the sunset, and seemed to glow out with a delicate cool pink” (Stoker 11); “Before the sun dipped below the black mass of Kettleness, standing boldly athwart the western sky, its downward way

was marked by myriad clouds of every sunset-colour—flame, purple, pink, green, violet, and all the tints of gold” (Stoker 73); “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” (Stoker 10–11). These examples demonstrate the Gothic novel characteristic of including not only descriptions of the dark but also of the scenic.

Another colour with a marginal role in the novel is brown. It appears in four cases, all but one of which refer to a person's physical characteristics, namely the colour of hair and skin. The colour orange is only used in the nominal phrase *orange trees* and in the name of a company. As such, it has no role in building a Gothic atmosphere.

## CONCLUSION

The corpus-assisted analysis of *Dracula* has shown that colour adjectives greatly contribute to the visual imagery created by the novel's descriptive language. However, there are some key differences in the frequency and positive or negative value of individual colours and their associated meanings. The distribution plots for each colour in the corpus show that they appear evenly spaced throughout the text; there are likely no chapters where at least one colour would not be mentioned, meaning that they are a noteworthy part of the text. The most frequently occurring colours are white, red, black and grey (with 102, 69, 29 and 21 relevant occurrences, respectively); each of the remaining analysed colours appears fewer than twenty times. Black, white and red also appear in distinct patterns and contexts. Black mainly refers to a person's appearance or describes the environment, white describes the vampires' appearance and occurs in the metaphorical sense to convey fear, and red often co-occurs with nouns for specific body parts, namely eyes and lips. Another colour that evokes a Gothic feeling is blue, since it relates to Dracula's supernatural powers. In terms of value, black never bears positive connotations, whereas white and red occur in both the positive and the negative sense, although the negative one tends to prevail as the two colours often refer to the appearance of vampires.

For a comprehensive study of colour terms in *Dracula*, it would be necessary to examine synonymous and closely related expressions for individual colours, such as inky and dark for black, snowy and ashen for white, and scarlet, ruby, crimson and ruddy for red. However, the analysis of basic expressions for colour indicates that the meanings and connotations of individual colours, particularly white, red and black, are an integral part of the novel and that they have a significant role in building its Gothic atmosphere.



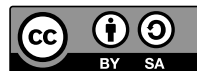
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## **Pomen barv v romanu *Drakula* Brama Stokerja**

Članek vsebuje s korpusom podprto analizo izrazov za barve v romanu *Drakula* Brama Stokerja. Namen analize je ugotoviti, ali barve prispevajo h gotskemu vzdušju romana. Barve se lahko uporabljajo za ustvarjanje določenega vzdušja, njihov pomen pa je tudi simbolni. Zato lahko močno okrepijo vzdušje v gotskem grozljivem romanu. Analiza nakazuje, da so bela, rdeča in črna najpomembnejše barve v romanu *Drakula*, saj se izrazi zanje pojavljajo v izrazitih vzorcih in kontekstih.

**Ključne besede:** Bram Stoker, *Drakula*, barvna simbolika, gotski roman, korpusna stilistika