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Ring-wraiths and Dracula

By Josh Woods

No other denizens of Middle-earth have quite the array of arbitrary limitations, weaknesses, and powers as the Ring-wraiths. They live in a peculiar state of un-death; they fear crossing water; they blindly sniff out living things with strange desire; they can turn others into wraiths like themselves, under their command, with a strike; even the status of their physical bodies seems uniquely bizarre in Middle-earth as it shifts form throughout the text (and supplemental texts). So why did Tolkien design the Ring-wraiths like this, or—the better path for investigating Tolkien—what was his source of inspiration? I think we can uncover a primary influence on the creation of Ring-wraiths by investigating parallels with Bram Stoker's character Count Dracula.

In "The Hunt for the Ring," Tolkien summarizes many of the features of the Ring-wraiths that we otherwise receive in scattered glimpses throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. He says:

All except the Witch-king were apt to stray when alone by daylight; and all, again save the Witch-king, feared water, and were unwilling, except in dire need, to enter it or to cross streams unless dryshod by a bridge. Moreover, their chief weapon was terror. This was actually greater when they were unclad and invisible; and it was greater also when they were gathered together. (*UT*, III, ii, 343)

Weakness in daylight, of course, isn't unique to Ring-wraiths; others such as orcs and trolls have problems with the sun too. But for Ring-wraiths, a major feature of this sunlight weakness is that of sight and perception. This is mirrored by their strength of vision in the dark of the "wraith-world," in the land of the "Unseen." Tolkien notes that their "power was most confused and diminished by daylight" (*UT*, III, notes, 353). And at Weathertop, Strider explains, "They themselves do not see the world of light as we do, but our shapes cast shadows in their minds, which only the noon sun destroys; and in the dark they perceive many signs and forms that are hidden from us: then they are most to be feared" (*LR, FR*, I, xi, 202). This is one of several echoes from Dr. Van Helsing's speech on the weaknesses and powers of Count Dracula: "He can see in the dark—no small power this, in a world which is one half shut from the light" (Stoker 211).

Unlike the Count Dracula of film versions (beginning with Count "Orlok" in Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*, notwithstanding speculations on the lost film *Drakula* from 1920), where the vampire is reduced to ash in the bright beams of the sun, the Count Dracula of the novel is not burned by daylight any more than are the Ring-wraiths, but both are weakened by it, possessing dulled senses and lesser powers by day.

Although weakness in daylight isn't entirely unique within Tolkien's legendarium, the Ring-wraiths' fear of crossing water is. No other type of being in this storyworld has this strange limitation, and Christopher Tolkien notes that his "father nowhere explained the Ringwraith's fear of water" (*UT*, III, ii, 344). But in his notes, J.R.R. Tolkien explains that one chief objective in the attack on Osgiliath was for the Nazgûl of Minas Morgul "to force the passage of the bridge of Osgiliath" over the Anduin, and that their travels north-west were greatly hindered by having to avoid river crossings (*UT*, III, ii, 344). The difficulty with this wasn't theirs to bear alone:

J.R.R. Tolkien himself found that keeping to this arbitrary rule as a writer “was difficult to sustain” (*UT*, III, ii, 344).

The Ring-wraiths are not always incapable of entering running water, as seen with the stand-off against Frodo at the Ford of Bruinen, but there Tolkien notes that the Ring-wraiths only “dared to enter the river” due to “the lure of the Ring straight before them” (*UT*, III, notes, 353). The hindrance of crossing water delays them nonetheless, both there at Bruinen and at earlier at Bucklebury Ferry, among other places.

Those who know best the film versions of *Dracula* might not remember that, in the novel, Dracula has this same strange fear of water, and he is limited in crossing it. As Dr. Van Helsing explains, Count Dracula “can only pass running water at the slack or the flood of the tide” (Stoker 212). This unique feature ends up being pivotal for the characters in the book. Indeed, where else but in *Dracula* does the hindrance of crossing water feature so significantly in the plot of contending with the undead enemy? Toward the end of the novel, Dracula’s flight back to his home castle is delayed by this limitation in crossing water—having to wait for the tide before he can leave his ship—allowing Dr. Van Helsing and his crew a little more time and thus the brief grace of hope unlooked-for in the final moments of the tale.

About those final moments, Sue Zlosnik briefly indicates that the scene of the ultimate defeat of Dracula is echoed remarkably in the destruction of the Witch-king (56). Both are slain by the piercing strike of a blade, and not by a single hero alone, but by two heroes simultaneously: Morris and Harker in the stabbing of Dracula; Merry and Éowyn in the stabbing of the Witch-king. At the moment of destruction both Dracula and the Witch-king are swept away in a passing dust of nothingness. Here are Count Dracula’s final moments:

He was deathly pale, just like a waxen image, and the red eyes glared with the horrible vindictive look which I knew too well.

As I looked, the eyes saw the sinking sun, and the look of hate in them turned to triumph.

But, on the instant, came the sweep and flash of Jonathan's great knife. I shrieked as I saw it shear through the throat; whilst at the same moment Mr. Morris's bowie knife plunged into the heart.

It was like a miracle; but before our very eyes, and almost in the drawing of a breath, the whole body crumbled into dust and passed from our sight. (Stoker 325)

And here is that moment for the Witch-king:

Upon it sat a shape, black-mantled, huge and threatening. A crown of steel he bore, but between rim and robe naught was there to see, save only a deadly gleam of eyes: the Lord of the Nazgûl. ... He bent over her like a cloud, and his eyes glittered; he raised his mace to kill. But suddenly he too stumbled forward with a cry of bitter pain, and his stroke went wide, driving into the ground. Merry's sword had stabbed him from behind, shearing through the black mantle, and passing up beneath the hauberk had pierced the sinew behind his mighty knee. 'Éowyn! Éowyn!' cried Merry. Then tottering, struggling up, with her last strength she drove her sword between crown and mantle, as the great shoulders bowed before her. The sword broke sparkling into many shards. The crown rolled away with a clang. Éowyn fell forward upon her fallen foe. But lo! the mantle and hauberk were empty. Shapeless they lay now on the ground, torn and tumbled; and a cry went up into the shuddering air, and faded to a shrill wailing, passing with the wind, a

voice bodiless and thin that died, and was swallowed up, and was never heard again in that age of this world. (*LR, RK, V, vi, 115-17*)

Other echoes of influence are evident here too, such as the motif of breath, of wind, and of voice in both, as well as Count Dracula's glaring red eyes and the Witch-king's "deadly gleam of eyes," both preceding their destruction.

But what about the signature feature of Count Dracula: drinking the blood of the living? No, the Ring-wraiths don't drink blood as vampires do, or at least I should say that it's not clear that they do. But the parallel remains in hints nonetheless. Strider says of the Ring-wraiths, "And at all times they smell the blood of living things, desiring and hating it" (*LR, FR, I, xi, 202*). This of course is an echo of the lure that the One Ring has on its bearers, such as Gollum, that they both hunger for it and despise it as they do so. But for the Ring-wraiths, it's not the One Ring they desire as Sauron does (Tolkien writes that "if one of them, even the Witch-king their captain, had seized the One Ring, he would have brought it back to his Master" (*UT, III, ii, 343*)); instead the Ring-wraiths' only explicitly stated desire seems to be for the blood of living things, which they no longer possess themselves in their undead state.

The drinking of blood gets even more curious when considering Gandalf's account of losing track of Gollum in Mirkwood. He says, "The Woodmen said that there was some new terror abroad, a ghost that drank blood. It climbed trees to find nests; it crept into holes to find the young; it slipped through windows to find cradles" (*LR, FR, I, ii, 67*). Who was this terror who, like a vampire—indeed like the Count himself as well as the vampire Lucy, both of whom prey on children—sneaks into homes at night and drinks the blood of infants in their cradles? Was it Gollum? It could have been, given the context of Gandalf's tale. But that seems somewhat unlikely when we see how Gollum acts later in the text, and what he tends to desire: more to

munch on cold, slimy fish than to drink warm blood from people. So who else could have been that terror in Mirkwood, especially considering that the Necromancer—Sauron—had left Dol Guldur long before these events? It turns out that there was at least one Ring-wraith remaining there in Mirkwood—in Dol Guldur—at this time, and it was the Second Chief of the Nazgûl, whose name was Khamûl the Black Easterling (*UT*, III, notes, 352). Unlike what we know of the desires of Gollum, we do know from Strider that Khamûl the Ring-wraith desires (and hates) the blood of living things, which he smells “at all times.”

Khamûl, as *Unfinished Tales* explains, is the same sniffing Ring-wraith who questions Gaffer Gamgee and Farmer Maggot, both of whom uninvite this unwelcomed visitor, at which point he leaves immediately, much like Count Dracula, who, as Dr. Van Helsing explains, “may not enter anywhere at the first, unless there be some one of the household who bid him to come” (Stoker 211).

Of turning others into the “Un-Dead” as Count Dracula does—drinking the blood of a hapless victim night after night, bit by bit, until she too becomes a vampire under his command—the Ring-wraiths display a parallel in their attack on Frodo at Weathertop. The Witch-king stabs Frodo in the shoulder with a Morgul-knife, and he leaves a splinter of the blade in the wound, which slowly works its way inward. This causes Frodo to “fade” bit by bit, night after night, until at Bruinen Frodo is “half in the wraith-world” and very near to becoming “a wraith under the dominion of the Dark Lord” (*LR, FR*, II, I, 234). Here we see mirrors of the physical attack (a bite and a puncture), an incremental transition into un-death, and the ultimate result of losing free will to the dominion of the vampire or Ring-wraith.

Circling beyond these specific parallels are some that are more distant and abstract. Consider the shapeshifting that the Ring-wraiths undergo—particularly compared to nearly all

other characters who do not change shapes (except for several in the tale “Of Beren and Luthien” from *The Silmarillion*). The Nazgûl begin their hunt for the Ring by heading north-west and moving like air, “unclad and unmounted, and invisible to eyes, and yet a terror to all living things that they passed near” (*UT*, III, i, 338). Then they take up raiment and concrete form, mount horses, and appear in the guise of Black Riders. After these forms are destroyed in the flood at the Ford of Bruinen, they take up new and more terrifying form as well as new mounts, not horses now but instead fell creatures that fly on leathery wings. Compare this to Count Dracula’s signature powers of shapeshifting: into two forms of Man (old and young), into a mist, into a bat, and in any form always emanating terror.

Even more distant but still extant and perhaps more significant thematically is the parallel of curse and imprisonment. The many mentions of the Ring-wraiths’ state of slavery to the Ring and their curse of the emptiness of undeath—the stretching of years and existence but not of true Life—are consistent with the descriptions of Count Dracula’s cursed state of undeath and limitation. Of Dracula and the “Un-Dead,” as he calls their kind, Dr. Van Helsing explains, “When they become such, there comes with the change the curse of immortality; they cannot die, but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world” (Stoker 190). And he says of Dracula’s unnatural imprisonment, “He can do all these things, yet he is not free. Nay; he is even more prisoner than the slave of the galley, than the madman in his cell. He cannot go where he lists; he who is not of nature has yet to obey some of nature’s laws—why we know not” (Stoker 211).

We could delve even further into the origins of Count Dracula and those of the Ring-wraith’s Chief and Second Chief, the Witch-king and Khamûl the Black Easterling. Although

their origins are shrouded in mystery, they seem to have been powerful warlords and sorcerers in their living days. Dr. Van Helsing says of Dracula:

Soldier, statesman, and alchemist... He had a mighty brain, a learning beyond compare, and a heart that knew no fear and no remorse. He dared even to attend the Scholomance [a school of black magic said to have been taught by the devil], and there was no branch of knowledge of his time that he did not essay. Well, in him the brain powers survived the physical death; though it would seem that memory was not all complete. (Stoker 263)

This line of parallels might even take us back to one of Sue Zlosnik's points about the Gothic tradition of a threat coming from mysterious villains of the East (52), in this case Count Dracula and Khamûl the Black Easterling. But for a vision of how Count Dracula influenced or inspired the Ring-wraiths, we might not need to go much further than we have.

I might, however, take a final guess at the impulse behind Tolkien's revision of Bram Stoker's classic vampire. It's a creative impulse in Tolkien that many have noted and described in various ways, with Tom Shippey's phrase "writing into the gap" being perhaps the most popular. When I do this kind of thing as a fiction writer myself, I tend to call it "the reparative impulse," being driven to creativity by seeing blind spots or flaws in something else (however subjective this might be). Tolkien did this with so many different elements and sources, "repairing" everything from the nursery rhyme "Hey-Diddle-Diddle" with Frodo's song at the Prancing Pony (*LR, FR*, I, ix, 170-72) to our off-balanced calendar of 365.25 days with the Shire calendar of a cleanly circular year of 360 days plus a short week between years (*LR, RK*, Appendix D, 386-87). In the character of Count Dracula, Tolkien might have seen great blind spots in just how this warrior-sorcerer was cursed beyond his own death so that he "must go on age after age" (Stoker 190), and why he was so cursed, and how his various idiosyncrasies of

powers, weaknesses, and limitations functioned. The Ring-wraiths seem to answer and repair many of the mysteries, the flaws, or blind spots of Bram Stoker's famous original, and by doing so with such depth and detail, Tolkien might well have breathed new life into the undead.

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