

## Reading Homework

# Taboos



Adam and Eve ate the fruit which they were forbidden to eat. All societies have rules and laws and customs which forbid people from doing certain things, but there is a special name for things which people are forbidden to eat or touch or look at or even talk about. These are called “taboos”. This word comes to us from the Polynesian language family. Taboos are not just laws; they tap into our deepest human fears. Most taboos are specific to a certain culture. For example, you have probably heard of the horror film series *Friday The 13th*. Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> is a taboo day. Why? Well, this is supposedly the day on which Jesus Christ was crucified almost two thousand years ago. One might think that this date must have been considered especially taboo for most of the last two thousand years. We would expect all Christians to see it as a taboo day, but that is not the case. Even a hundred years ago most Catholic Italians considered Friday *the 17th* to be the tabooest day. Among the Greek Orthodox Christians, it was *Tuesday* the 13th which was considered taboo. So, what was it that made Friday the 13th

not just a day of bad luck, but a truly taboo day? It was actually the horror movie series, *Friday the 13th*! So, taboos that we sometimes think must be very ancient and widespread can actually be quite recent and not at all widespread. Some taboos are downright silly. In Japanese culture the number 42 is taboo. This number is thought to be bad luck for the simple reason that when we say the numbers “*shi-ni*” it sounds like “death”. So, many taboos are clearly just superstitious nonsense, but others are very sensible indeed. These “sensible taboos” are quite often not specific to any one culture but are universal.



The *Dracula* story actually ties into two nearly universal taboos. The first of these is about the proper disposal of dead bodies. In all cultures of the world there are rules about how dead are supposed to be properly disposed of and strong taboos against violating these procedures. Methods vary greatly. In Japan, bodies are burned. In most of Europe and the new world the bodies are buried. The ancient Vikings would place the body in a ship, float it out to sea and then shoot burning arrows into it to burn the body at sea. Certain American Indian tribes raised bodies on platforms so the birds would come and eat them. In India holy men's bodies were floated down the Ganges River. However, there is no society in the world which simply ignores the dead. Why? Because this would be dangerous. People

often die of diseases and these are often infectious. Leaving a dead body in the house, the village or the city would risk spreading infection. Also, the smell of dead bodies attracts dangerous animals scavenging for food. No one wants wolves, bears or lions coming into their house or village looking for food. So, bodies are carefully disposed of. Of course, people told stories about *why* the bodies had to be disposed of. In many cultures the usual explanation for why bodies must be disposed of properly is that if they are not the dead will return to harm the living, (which is close to the truth if the bodies carried diseases). Interestingly, many cultures say that the dead who return do so in order to *eat* the living. This ties in with the second taboo.



The other taboo closely associated with *Dracula* is against cannibalism. “Vampire” means someone who drinks the blood of other human beings, which is a form of cannibalism. Almost every society in the world has a very strict taboo against eating people. To be clear, the rule is actually “don’t use your friends and family for food”. There are certain cultures where part of a friend or family member is eaten at the time of a funeral so that

those who loved this person will remember them. Eating *enemies* was quite acceptable in many societies. But using friends or family for food would obviously cause any society to collapse. Dracula, therefore, breaks two of the universal taboos: he is a dead body which is not properly at rest in its grave, and he is a kind of cannibal who feeds on his own people.