The Rhetoric of Realism in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*

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Contemporary cinema and literature have popularized the vampire to the extent that its existence, albeit fictional, no longer produces the same kind of terror as Bram Stoker’s novel did when it was first released in 1897. Although *Dracula* is a novel that thrives on horror and heinousness, it derives its esteem from the realism with which it is told. This realism is in part due to the epistolary, document-based design of the text, but is largely attributed to the narrative’s interplay of various aspects of Western culture that work to make even the vampire, in all its fantastic glory, ordinary. Written for a Western audience, *Dracula* consequently depends upon culturally relevant themes to induce fear among its readership. These cultural themes—of tradition, technology, and science—are representative of the widespread attitudes, and likewise, shift of attitudes within broader Western European society. To enforce realism, as a result, *Dracula* enmeshes contemporary culture with horror through its use of the epistolary form and a multiplicity of narrators.

The narrative of Dracula brilliantly uses the epistolary style to intensify the horror of the vampire. The novel entwines foreignness with mainstream culture by recounting events through letters, journal or diary entries, newspaper clippings, telegrams, and articles. Using a mix of narrators who are themselves
characters within the tale, the narration is primarily performed by Jonathan Harker, Mina Murray, John Seward, Lucy Westenra, and to a lesser extent, through the letters and telegrams of Arthur Holmwood and Quincey Morris. These forms of narration can be sampled from various parts of the book, including the divisions within the narrative itself. Thus, the chapters are themselves divided such that they correspond to specific journal or diary entries of individual characters. For example, just as chapter one is entirely comprised of Jonathan Harker’s shorthand written account of his journey to Transylvania (11), chapter six originates from Mina Murray’s journal (67) and Dr. Seward’s diary (77) entries.

These variations within chapters extend to individual methods of record keeping and the representation of the storytelling. While Harker uses shorthand to write in a physical journal (11) for instance, Seward’s diary is maintained on a phonograph (64). Therefore, whether it is journal keeping or articles from the “Westminster Gazette” (170), mail or telegraphic correspondence (109), Dracula relies on several methods of narration to provide a sense of documentary realism during the telling of the story.

As a result, in an almost archaeological fashion, these accounts amalgamate to create a sense of realism, which presents the information as historical facts. This is reinforced by the opening passage of the novel, seemingly written by an extraneous character, who explains the compilation and format of the story (10). This character describes the assembly of loose documents into a narrative order to facilitate a factual and fluid reading of the story, such that it excludes any event “wherein memory may err” (10). Thus, written in an authoritative, objective voice, the passage supplies the reader with a basis for judgement upon which the actuality of events is realized and, in effect, mostly unquestioned.

In a similar fashion, the epistolary format warrants the role of several narrators, who can provide contrasting and corroborative views of the vampire. For example, although the word “aquiline” is used consistently to describe the Count’s nose by both Harker (26) and Seward (265), the vampire’s same “white sharp teeth” (265) are first described as those with “astonishing vitality” (Stoker 27) by Harker and later like a “wild beast” (265) by Seward. In each case, the
descriptions provided of the Count’s features are largely consistent. However, the primary difference between the narrators is that while Harker uses plain adjectives to describe the Count’s teeth, Seward opts for a metaphor. The effect here is mainly corroborative, though the differences in narrative voice help readers form their own image of the Count. Despite the differing descriptions, these accounts give corroborative consistency such that there is no doubt regarding the existence of the vampire as it is described by the narrators. Thus, the use of several narrators further enhances the validity and realism of the Count and the overarching story.

Similarly, building on the method and perspective-based narration, Stoker uses his narrators and their separate voices to draw on their cultural differences. These voices, best defined as “what we hear” of the narrator (Abbott 70), embody the main cultural attitudes of the novel’s nineteenth century Western European readership. Specifically, however, these cultural distinctions are represented by Lucy Westenra, Mina Murray, and Dr. John Seward.

To illustrate, Lucy Westenra exemplifies the traditional ideals emblematic of the pre-industrial Western European society. She is suited to a majority of the readership of nineteenth-century England which had yet to formally accept and assimilate into the technological and scientific approaches of the new culture. Through her beliefs in marriage, the vanity of women, and her perception of a woman’s responsibilities (60), Lucy represents tradition: she is unlike Mina and her modern ways but is instead entirely invested in romance and home-making. Her greatest ambition, like most traditional women, is to “settle down soberly” into married life (60). Lucy also demonstrates the pre-modern remnants of the sexism that penetrated society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She writes that “women are such cowards” (62) and are “unworthy” of the men that are intrinsically so “noble" (63). Affected by her constant praise of men and their nobility, Lucy’s narration through her letters and minimal diary entries are wrought with this voice of affection and are simplistic, conventional, and in consequence, old-fashioned—a voice that Stoker’s contemporary readers would have recognized.

Conversely, Mina Murray’s narration exemplifies her attitude and the cultural ideals of modernity, shattering the ideal of a woman set out by Lucy. As
a woman of advanced England, her ways of thinking are fraught with the technological culture of her time. In the very first letter by her hand that the reader encounters, Mina appears to be absorbed by the notion of narration and journaling, writing whenever she feels “inclined” to (60); she wishes to master shorthand, the stenograph, and even the typewriter (60). For an “assistant schoolmistress”, she looks forward to reporting like “lady journalists” and practices the required skills accordingly (60). Mina is portrayed as a strong female character that is advanced not only for her time but also for her sex. When Van Helsing says that “she has a man’s brain” and a “woman’s heart” (221), he is impressed with her ambition, perfectionism, and her care-giving qualities. In contrast to Lucy, Mina does not accept the ideal of the passive woman; in fact, Mina is described as “noble” (176)—the very characteristic Lucy attributes to men—and she is far from cowardly as she marches forward in the fight against the Count. Seen as a whole, Mina is essentially depicted as a woman of modern culture, who strives to use the new technology afforded by industrialism and her mastery of skills to satisfy her ambitions. Thus, in personality, Mina particularly embodies the new, modern culture and can be seen in terms of the “New Woman” that she is often called (92).

Mina’s narrative style also aligns with her narrative personality. Embracing new technology and machinery, her modernity is evident in the way she describes the horrific nature of Dracula. In the first scene, the reader learns of Dracula’s entry into Western Europe, specifically Whitby, where Mina finds herself in close proximity to the Count (91). She describes her feet as “weighted with lead” and her joints turning “rusty” (91), thereby defining herself and her reactions in terms of the machines and technology she frequently uses. By describing her own sensations mechanically, Mina's writing exhibits the widespread—and recognizable—influence of industrialization in her culture and community. As a consequence, her use of language and tone, while certainly

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unique, would have resonated with the late nineteenth century Western European audience that was experiencing industrial expansion.

In a similar vein, John Seward’s narration professes an underlying scientific and rational voice consistent with the cultural trend towards the acceptance of science in modern England. Seward is first introduced to the reader through Lucy, when she describes him to Mina as “resolute” and “imperturbable” shortly after relating that he also owns a lunatic asylum (59). These descriptions give readers an image of Seward as a stoic personality: one who can with emotional detachment examine objects of thought for what they truly are. Moreover, when asked to conduct a post-mortem on Lucy’s body, he asks immediately what good it will bring to “science” or “human knowledge” in doing so (160). Reliant on rationality as the foundation of his actions and beliefs, Seward is perhaps best described in the words of Abraham Van Helsing as “clever” and one who can “reason well” (182). When considered holistically, Seward’s unrelenting need for empirical evidence, as well as his curiosity and adherence to rigid logic, in effect make him representative of the ideals of science – a growing cultural trend that resurfaced during the industrial era and that would have been all too familiar to Stoker’s contemporary readership.

In effect, Seward’s narration reflects the same kind of rationality and science displayed by his general personality. His diary is kept on a phonograph (64), and his frequent telegraphic voice is evident whenever he chronicles the progress of his patients, particularly when describing Renfield as, for example, of “sanguine temperament; great physical strength; morbidly excitable…” (65). In addition, Seward is quick to relate his sensations to physiological sources, like when he compares sleep deprivation to “cerebral exhaustion” (124). Attributable to his scientific background and practice, Seward’s narration of events is, as a result, plagued by his active, questioning mind; especially when confronted with the possibility of an “undead state” of being, characteristic of a vampire (191), Seward’s instincts constantly beg for “some rational explanations for mysterious things” (193). The effect is unmistakable: Seward’s unfailing need for empiricism makes it so that when he does accept the fight against Dracula (206), readers can trust that this is in fact a horrifying reality to which no other alternatives exist. Thus, Seward’s adherence to scientific integrity and methodology, in effect, enhances his reliability as a narrator and quells any questions regarding his
credibility.

Given the established trust in Seward’s corroborative narration, even readers of a more skeptical disposition can willingly accept other, seemingly ludicrous accounts of Dracula insofar as Seward accepts them himself. Of these accounts, Harker’s opening diary entries offer the most horrific, fantastic descriptions of Count Dracula. He writes of how “strange” it is that he has never seen the Count eat or drink (33); that he is “amazed” at not seeing his host’s reflection in his shaving mirror, despite seeing the Count standing directly in front of the glass (32); the “uneasiness” he feels at seeing the “demoniac fury” blazing in the Count’s eyes when gazing at Harker’s bloody shaving wound (33); and, above all, his terror when witnessing the Count crawl face down the castle walls, “like a lizard” (40). These incidents are what readers encounter at the very beginning of the novel, and set the macabre, fear-inducing tone for the rest of the story. Yet the true horror of these incidents are realized in the rising action, when Seward reads Harker’s journal and remarks that it “must” be true and that it is “uncommonly clever and full of energy”. That Seward, the scientific skeptic, does not deny the credibility of Harker’s journal demonstrates to readers that these qualities must indeed be true. It is in this way that Seward’s scientific personality and narration engenders the story with the kind of realism that enhances the novel’s horrific appeal.

Together, these narrative voices interact to provide an exceptionally detailed and layered illustration of Count Dracula and the urgency of the threat he poses to Stoker’s Western European readers, in effect enhancing the “rhetoric of the narrative” (Abott 40). By relying on the cultural voices of tradition, technology, and science, Stoker strategically uses his narrators to bolster a story of a grotesque, atavistic creature who finds himself in the modern world. The novel’s epistolary format encapsulates the various methods, perspectives, and
styles of narration which serve to enhance its realism and, as a result, its horrific appeal. Given the inherent cultural characteristics of the novel, it is unsurprising then that *Dracula* remains as popular, and indeed as familiar today as it was when it was first released.

WORKS CITED
