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Constructing Evil through the Epistolary in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine why Bram Stoker's *Dracula* uses a mixed-epistolary form, and how this decision serves to Gothicize the text. Stoker's late 19th century work relies heavily on the Gothic tropes of found text, foreign bodies (both geographic and individual), and the positionality of wealth and gender, but its use of the mixed-epistolary form sets it apart from other great Gothic novels of the time. Much like a letter in itself, *Dracula* relies upon both the explicit and the implicit, and through the lens of this structural framework the author argues that the values that hold Van Helsing's alliance of vampire hunters together are the very notions being horrified within the text. Through *Dracula*'s own focal points of progress, the roles of women in society, and the construction of a monster, this paper expands upon the ways in which a medium can influence, or form a new, message.

Keywords: Gothic Novel, *Dracula*, Epistolary, Bram Stoker, 19th Century Novel

Introduction

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* opens on an Englishman's journal documenting the gastronomical wonders of Europe, and the failings of Eastern train systems. As the novel progresses, and as Jonathan Harker begins to understand the horrors that lie in wait for him, the means by which information is communicated also begin to change. Stoker's reader is eventually offered not just diaries, but also letters, transcriptions of recorded memos, telegrams,

and even newspaper clippings as methods of insight into the plot. This style of storytelling shuns the panoptic, instead centering on the discrete characters' responses to Dracula and his spreading contagion as the primary focus of the novel. The contextual framework an author chooses for their story not only can alter its meaning, but also can serve as a kind of unique conduit by which the messages of a novel can be reinforced. *Dracula* thus builds Gothic tension through both its mixed-epistolary style and its vampires, fostering a synergism between form and content. The use of first-person narrative in close temporal proximity to the events described allows Stoker to examine the vampire in a uniquely modern way that seems to transcend the limits of its setting and time. As *Dracula* explicitly explores progress, the roles of women in society, and the construction of a monster, *Dracula's* mixed-epistolary form illuminates those same topics in a potentially more sinister light.

The epistolary form became popular predominately in the 18th century but had become less common in Stoker's time. The first known epistolary novel, Guilleragues' *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, was translated into English in 1678 and began over a century of fictions based on the conceit of letter-writing. Authors such as Samuel Richardson, Aphra Behn, and Frances Burney chose the epistolary style for works that have later been seen as foundational for our modern novel. However, the form fell out of favor as third-person conceptualizations of consciousness, verified through an omniscient narrator instead of a potentially biased or faulty first-person account, became the focus of later works. As Joe Bray states, "The epistolary novel is often thought to present a relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity, as its letter-writers apparently jot down whatever is passing through their heads at the moment of writing" (1). This assumed inadequacy of epistolary novels was part of the reason for its decline, but Stoker's use of external sources and multiple narrators, potentially inspired by works such as

Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, sets *Dracula* apart from even a true epistolary form. Indeed, this more exploratory epistolarity conforms to Stoker's opinions on writing more generally. In a 1908 article on fiction, Stoker wrote, "There is perhaps no branch of work amongst the arts so free at the present time as that of the writing of fiction[...] Subject and method of treatment are both free. A writer is under no special obligation, no preliminary guarantee; he may choose his own subject and treat it in his own way" (479). By choosing a mixed epistolary form, Stoker is both embracing the fallibility of his characters and forcing his readers to grapple with an overwhelming amount of information. The form mimics the novel's atmosphere of the "nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance," bustling with new technologies and new threats to England (Stoker 40). Here, Stoker's unique treatment of his subject separates *Dracula* from the other novels of his time while also creating sensations of doubt and inundation for both the characters and the audience. Thus, the mixed epistolary form is an essential component of what makes this work so memorable.

This distinction serves the novel well, particularly as a Gothic creation. Gothic works of the 18th and 19th centuries relied heavily on the 'found-manuscript' trope, which Stoker's beginning explanatory note regarding "How these papers have been placed in sequence" recalls (5). *Dracula*'s multiplicity of perspective and parceling of plot developments across several journal entries and letters is very much of the Gothic tradition. As Allen Grove states of the genre, "almost universally Gothic texts are fragmented, interrupted, unreadable, or presented through multiple framings and narrators. Gothic novels tend to highlight their own incompleteness and the unreliability of their narrators" (2). Stoker's work is no exception, with letters, journals, tapes, and telegrams being interspersed together and presented for the reader to craft into a cohesive narrative, and this fragmentary structure perfectly informs the growing

fragmentation of his characters in response to Dracula. Further, certain qualities of letters and diaries lend themselves to Gothic exploration. The act of reading private correspondence transforms the audience into an active participant in a book's subject while also establishing a sense of the uncanny; the messages are both to us and not to us, making the familiar act of reading strange. Additionally, epistolary works occupy the liminal space that creates horror. In his essay on the epistolary sub-genre, Ronald Rosbottom defines the form as a continuous dance between two opposing poles of thought: "*Espoir*: hope and the anticipation of what is to occur; *souvenir*: memory and the attempt to recreate the past — these are the two psychological and temporal poles, moving toward and away from the present, which identify all epistolary narrative" (289). These constant forward and backward motions are a necessary component of *Dracula*, where much of its terror resides in the lack of clarity between the past, present, and future. The weaving of letters in with news articles and journals then elevates *Dracula* to a further level of instability, with various mediums jostling for the reader's attention and trust. The mixed-epistolary form, then, was evidently the most effective conduit for the evil of Stoker's vampire.

One of the main ways Stoker uses first-person writings to create a Gothic and haunting atmosphere is by emphasizing physical distance. Early in the novel, Jonathan Harker exclaims, "The castle is a veritable prison, and I am a prisoner!" (Stoker 32). Jonathan is not trapped just by the castle walls, but also by his inability to communicate freely with Mina and Mr. Hawkins, Jonathan's employer in the legal field. Lucy, too, becomes a prisoner in her own home, and a lack of communication is what leads, in part, to her death. Van Helsing's telegram is delayed, and Dr. Seward arrives too late after the cataclysmic events of the previous night. While this could be poignantly described from the third person, the series of explanatory titles that end the

chapter are alone powerful enough to convey the destruction that a delayed telegram can cause. The last three titles read, “*Telegram, Van Helsing, Antwerp, to Seward, Carfax (SENT TO CARFAX, SUSSEX, AS NO COUNTY GIVEN; DELIVERED LATE BY TWENTY-TWO HOURS)*”; “*Dr Seward’s Diary*”; “*Memorandum Left by Lucy Westenra*” (130, emphasis in original). The urgency of the first missive is made clear by the fact it was delivered as a telegram, instead of a letter, and the futility of this telegram is then poignantly emphasized by the last note. When we, as audience, see the word “left,” we are instantly made to understand Lucy will soon be both dead and un-dead. Later, the awfulness of Lucy’s death is underscored by Mina’s letters “*to Lucy Westenra (UNOPENED BY HER),*” and we are forced to read Mina’s affirmations of love for her friend while knowing the tragedy that is about to befall them both (140, 143). Thus, we see how Stoker’s mixed-epistolary form emphasizes the fragmentation that is steadily overtaking the world within the novel; even the writing that is sent does not necessarily reach its intended audiences and is therefore futile. In this way, Mina’s letter is as defunct as the person to whom she is writing, making it the effective equivalent of an apostrophe in a diary entry. As a result, the characters consistently must reckon with the harms of distance and delay, and Stoker’s use of letters here shows us the sorrow that physical and temporal distance can create.

Dracula’s mixed-epistolary form also introduces another kind of isolation: the isolation of certain characters from the reader. With physical separation from other characters within the novel leading to the failure of the letter, the journal becomes the only reliable method for communication and documentation. When even this medium is also cut off, the characters become textually exiled from both the plot and the audience. We see this first when Jonathan escapes the castle and cannot communicate with Mina for over a month, and we, too, are left

unsure of his fate. Stoker's removal of what the reader would likely have assumed to be the protagonist's voice is disorienting, and we must puzzle through Jonathan's narrative absence with Mina. However, there are also characters that never have a voice. Dracula and Renfield are both isolated by the mixed-epistolary form, despite being shown to write letters or calculations that the other characters had the ability to access. As Erik Butler argues, Dracula "passes unseen in a more subtle way by deploying a panoply of surrogate selves on paper" (17). The fact that these surrogate selves are specifically hidden from us is important, because it allows Stoker to both Other Dracula and also heighten our perception of his dangerousness. It is Dracula's intellectual parasitism of Jonathan—and British culture more generally—that allows him to infect the modern world, first with his writings and then by using his knowledge of soliciting and English railways to carry his unholy contagion overseas. Transmission of thought, for Dracula, is always a literary act of translation, and he therefore relies upon both a foreign language and a foreign audience. For many of the English characters in the novel, writing is a necessity that does not require a reader. Dr. Seward does not anticipate anyone will listen to his recordings, and Jonathan writes "I turn to my diary for repose. The habit of entering accurately must help soothe me" (Stoker 41). Even when, at the end of the novel, we are privy to Dracula's thoughts, these are still conveyed only through Mina's English body. In this way, Dracula relies upon an external reader to perpetuate his self and his disease. Thus, Stoker horrifies his monsters by creating a comparative mental displacement of Renfield and Dracula through their narrative absences, but he also implicitly horrifies the very act of reading by making it a necessity for Dracula's planned destruction of modern England.

This isolation of voice becomes complicated by Stoker's additional narrative distancing of Van Helsing, Quincey Morris, and Arthur Holmwood (later referred to as Lord Godalming).

For almost the entirety of the novel, these characters are Othered by their lack of reflexive journal entries – are we therefore supposed to read them as monsters? Because Van Helsing is Dutch, Quincey Morris is American, and Lord Godalming is a member of the upper class, their isolation means that only middle-class British voices are given emotional representation by the text. Van Helsing does appropriate others' forms of communication, such as letter-writing, telegraphing, and, most notably, speaking into Dr. Seward's phonograph, but this still sets him apart from the other characters, whose minds we are allowed to see into through their personal writings. Perhaps the three are intelligent enough to see, as Butler posits, that "Harker's entries in his journal provide a breeding ground for the undead, a medium in which the vampire can mutate and take on unprecedented forms of terror" (17). It is more likely, however, that these characters are so defined by their associations with the others that they have no need for intrinsic voices. Van Helsing's first letter addresses his relationship with Dr. Seward, claiming, "Tell your friend that when that time you suck from my wound so swiftly the poison[...] you did more for him when he wants my aids and you call for them than all his great fortune could do" (106). It is only within the very last chapter that we read two memorandums from Van Helsing, but these he addresses to his "old and true friend John Seward, MD, of Purfleet, London, in case I may not see him" (313). In this way, Van Helsing's interactions are all entirely based on his connection to the other characters, and his internal monologues are not considered relevant. Subtextually, however, this operates as the human mirror to the vampiric need to be invited into a location by its tenant. Stoker, then, ensures that Van Helsing, Quincey Morris, and Lord Godalming are uncanny figures, in that they are clearly integral in hunting Dracula and saving Mina, but our inability to read their more intimate thoughts still makes us weary of their true intentions.

The text, both explicitly and with its framing device, also demarcates clear distinctions in gender roles. Because almost all depictions within the work are necessarily done through first-person narrative, Stoker has to render his female characters' inner thoughts and feelings more completely than he otherwise may have. This becomes especially interesting when looking at Lucy, whose writing style is far more effusive and colloquial than that of her male counterparts. Her first written correspondence is with Mina, to whom she writes, "I must say you tax me *very* unfairly with being a bad correspondent. I wrote to you *twice* since we parted, and your last letter was only your *second*" (56, emphasis in original). These coquettish italics are not present in previous writings from other characters and serve to instantly set Lucy apart as more feminine, and possibly less intelligent, than her friends. Later on, she expresses voraciously "But oh, Mina, I love him; I love him; I love him!" (57). Her ravenous appetite for love is then emphasized further when she writes, "Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her," mimicking the desperate thirst of the vampire far before she is infected (60). Lucy's characterization also illustrates how the first-person narrative can be potentially deceiving; it is unclear to the reader whether Lucy is merely inhabiting a stereotypically feminine role, or actually typifies one. Her later writing in her personal diary does show a higher degree of acuity, as demonstrated when she pieces together that someone has drugged her servants quite quickly, but her actions remain erotic. Indeed, even when journaling, a more introspective practice she begins only after her interactions with Dracula, she sexualizes the act of writing, stating that she "shall hide this paper in my breast, where they shall find it when they come to lay me out" (132). Lucy's turn from girl into vampire is described through her feminine and sexual writing, and thus Stoker's representations of Lucy become a method of monsterizing femininity within the text.

Mina, by contrast, is not presented as the wicked coquette, but rather as the comforting wife. Mina's occupation of a traditional gender role is emphasized even in the opening pages of the novel, with Jonathan commencing his writings because "they may refresh my memory when I talk over my travels with Mina" (10). Even the more sexually permissive Lucy acknowledges Mina's unbreakable commitment to Jonathan, describing Dr. Seward as "a man that would just *do for you*, if you were not already engaged" (56, emphasis in original). However, this attachment is not akin to the overwhelming love Lucy expresses toward Arthur, but rather a relationship centered on Mina's ability to work for her husband. Unlike the sexually powerful Lucy, Mina presents herself as almost an asexual indentured stenographer, avoiding writing with erotic overtones even when referring to her husband. As Ledger argues, she may even be "a woman who, firmly rooted in the maternal paradigm, settles for the 'ideal' of middle-class Victorian womanhood" (105). These qualities are often lauded by the other characters, who elevate her achievements because of her accompanying self-effacing nature, but they also prevent her from being incorporated into the male-driven efforts to save England. The potential tragedy of Stoker's Victorian woman, then, is that by being excluded by the very same people claiming to protect her from Dracula, Mina is effectively united with the monster against them. Thus, Stoker is able to establish Mina as a seemingly subservient wife and typist through the multiplicity of his mixed-epistolary form, but this role also ultimately alienates her from her husband and her writing, fracturing the narrative of the perfect woman.

Mina, however, is not just an adored and relied upon victim. Her femininity is not purely an ideal – it is actually insidiously threatening, though the subversion is not through the body, as with Lucy, but through the mind. As Butler states, Mina's form of writing can be read as a foil to Lucy's: "Her studies in business-writing form the opposite pendant to her modest letters to

Lucy and personal journal-keeping. Mina's side interests go hand in hand with a hunger for information in all its forms" (20). This hunger is what makes Mina monstrous even before Dracula's attack, but Mina does not possess Lucy's charming weaknesses and flirtatious mannerisms. Instead, she occupies a liminal space of gender, having both a "man's brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted – and a woman's heart" (Stoker 207). Mina's masculinity at this point is not derived from Dracula, but rather from her intellectual abilities. She is lauded by Van Helsing because she has created a story out of the disparate writings of the other characters, allowing them all to discover themes they hadn't seen before. As Prescott and Giorgio write, "Despite her disclaimers of wifely propriety, writing represents for Mina an attempt to establish a strong sense of self, which in this charged historical moment carries the political resonance of the New Woman" (490). Mina's self-efficacy and, more greatly, self-expression occurs through her creation of the very text we hold. In this way, Mina becomes a mirror for Stoker, and the beginning of her partial transformation into vampire thus takes on a far more sinister and pervasive tone.

Mina's progression into vampirism is, however, purportedly prevented. Quincey Morris's last words assure us Mina's infection has been eradicated, as he cries "It was worth this to die! Look! Look![...] See! the snow is not more stainless than her forehead! The curse has passed away!" (326). Yet this moving final moment is not as unambiguous as it first seems. Mina's masculinity, which marks her monstrosity, does not abandon her, as is proven by the mere existence of the novel. Mina remains the masculine author of the text, even if the explicit denotation of her corruption is "blotted out," as her husband later writes (326). This may be because Mina's descent is figured differently than we, as reader, may expect. Mina is not just the passive victim of Dracula – she is turned into the assailant. Dracula is discovered "forcing

her face down onto his bosom[...] The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink," but Mina later remarks that she "did not want to hinder him" (247, 251). Dracula explains this maneuver as making them indelibly connected. This point becomes increasingly relevant as we end the book, for while Jonathan writes that Mina does not display signs of vampirism seven years after Dracula's demise, we know that she possibly retains a kind of dormant, transmissible infection that could harm her new son. Butler grapples with the danger of this, writing, "In the cyclical time of the calendar, the child's entry into the world overlaps with the vampire's vanishing from it. This convergence points toward the possibility that the monster has wormed its way into another body and lies dormant, waiting to strike when least expected[...] If in fact 'some...spirit has passed into' the young Harker, then a horror lies in store" (30). But this danger extends beyond just her offspring within the plot – the manuscript she compiles painstakingly, carrying her name into the next generations, can also be seen as her progeny. Thus, Stoker's mixed-epistolary form here embodies the threat of Quincey Harker to the world of the novel.

If the text, then, is acting as an equivalent for the 'virus' of vampirism, then we, as readers, must also be victims. Mina drinking Dracula's blood does not just bind them theoretically, it also connects them mentally. This telepathic connection is important later, when Dracula is fleeing England – here, he is not giving or taking from Mina transfusions of blood, but rather transfusions of thought. This both feeds into and challenges the Gothic trope regarding the danger of knowledge, since Mina's gift is symbolic of her infection, but it also becomes the key tool the characters use to find and defeat Dracula. In much the same way we, attempting to gain knowledge from this text, must also be transformed into vampires. It is Stoker's construction of the novel as a mixed-epistolary work that gives it this power; the reader is necessarily acting as a

parasite, deriving knowledge from multiple authors to manifest total understanding, just as Dracula takes blood from almost every major character in his quest to conquer England. Similarly, much like Dracula's inability to pervade Britain without acts of translation, the text is unable to meaningfully exist without an audience; the fear the novel is meant to disseminate can only grip the curious reader, those willing to intellectually devour the lives of others, and those who invite all of these characters into their mind. The intimacy of narrative endemic to the mixed-epistolary form here acts like the bat beating against the window, horrifying the spectator while perversely enticing them to discover what will happen next. As Macy Todd states, "the novel also demonstrates that violence and writing share a relationship that exceeds the form of call and response; writing in *Dracula* is itself a method of violent organization, and violence in the novel is frequently spoken of through metaphors of writing" (362). Thus, the violence of Dracula is also the violence of *Dracula*, and we, like Mina, fall prey to becoming "flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood; kin of my kin" with the ultimate monster (252).

This is the major subtextual message that Stoker's framing device conveys, and through the mixed-epistolary his Gothic horror synergistically binds form and content to create one of the most haunting novels in English literature. *Dracula* works on two levels, one explicit and one implicit, and each provides the reader with different definitions of monstrosity. The novel explicitly uses technological progress, Mina, and the compilation of the manuscript to defeat Dracula, but implicitly, through the mixed-epistolary framework, horrifies the notions of progress, the female body, and, most sinisterly, the reader. We see that physical and temporal isolation, Mina's lack of clear gender conformity, and the necessary parasitism of readers is what leads to a monster like Dracula having so much power. As Butler writes, "Stoker's work remains timely more than one hundred years after its initial publication because its eponymous

antihero draws his substance and strength as a monster from anxieties and uncertainties that material transformations in the conditions of everyday life produce” (13). Dracula is not bound to 19th-century England; through each reading of Stoker's novel, the vampire is reborn.

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