Writing and Its Purpose in *Dracula*

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) can be looked at as a set of documents compiled to tell the legend of a monster. The multiple perspectives and experiences with the vampire are what allow the group to eventually defeat him. Knowledge is absolutely powerful, as is displayed when Mina Harker begins to transcribe and distribute everyone’s journals. This reproduction of documents is extremely significant to the plot, for “to know everything about Dracula is to know how to destroy him” (Richards 1). The collecting and cross-referencing of documents also creates a statement about writing, because everything is being written for an audience, and each character has a different purpose for writing. Nevertheless, the differences in purpose and writing style are what make the compilation that much more useful to the group when attempting to destroy their enemy. Some say that the book’s “its jagged, stylistically mixed narration” are what make *Dracula* the Gothic novel it is considered to be, but it is also why readers find it extremely interesting (Riquelme 590).

The introduction to the novel is not made by its author but by one of its characters, the identity of which the reader does not discover until the very end. It is a statement about the style and form of the story:

> How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them (Stoker 5).
This quote not only acts as an introduction, but also sets up the importance of accuracy and authenticity within documents. This is a statement that depicts the importance of writing style in journalism, and displays how information is collected and distributed on a large scale. In the 19th century, this created a large market and helped to improve literacy. Up until that point, journalism “drew life from an educated, responsible and homogeneous public” (Thompson). Stoker’s imitation of this mass reproduction is a mirror image of the advancements in publishing of the time.

Stoker’s novel begins with the shorthand journal of Jonathan Harker, a solicitor for a real-estate company who is sent to Dracula’s Transylvanian home on a business deal. It seems to become a “travelogue” as Harker describes his travels across Europe. He states that his purpose for writing is for his fiancée so that she will know everything about his journey. His accounts are extremely detailed and accurate, perhaps because he is not writing for himself but for someone else. It is through Harker that we are first introduced to Count Dracula, “a tall old man…clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere” (21). This absence of color and light in Harker’s description only foreshadow the threat that Dracula has the potential to become. He interestingly tells Harker upon his arrival to “leave something of the happiness [he] bring[s],” perhaps hinting that Harker is about to enter a dark time in his life (22).

The first four chapters document Harker’s travels into Transylvania and his time spent at Dracula’s castle, which take place over the span of about two months. In the beginning of the fifth chapter, Stoker introduces new characters as well as a new writing style. Mina Murray, Harker’s fiancée, and her friend Lucy Westenra share a correspondence by writing letters to each other. Just like Harker’s journal, the women’s letters are intended for a private audience. Mina
is a school mistress, and Lucy, a socialite, is her best friend. Through these letters, Lucy explains her most recent love interests, all of which have proposed to her: Arthur Holmwood, Dr. John Seward, and Quincy Morris. In light of Lucy’s activity, Mina begins to miss Harker and dream of the day they can settle down and marry. As she switches from writing letters to writing in her journal, she begins to practice her shorthand. One can conclude that this is not only so she can be “useful to Jonathan” but also so she can create a portfolio for professional purposes.

Mina is not the only person who is writing for professional purposes: Dr. Seward’s diary is recorded via phonograph in order to document some of his interesting psychiatric cases, namely that of Mr. Renfield, a zoophagous lunatic. He sustains himself by eating other life, and seems to be under the trance of an unknown “Master” to which he keeps referring. His rants get progressively more lucid and begin to create anxiety in Seward. The doctor records his visits with Renfield and also reports on his behavior, and because his intention is professional, one assumes his audience to be fellow physicians. However, as his entries proceed they become a bit more personal in nature. He begins to care for Lucy after Dracula attacks her- although the cause of Lucy’s illness is unknown to Seward early on- strictly due to medical interest, but also because he loves her. His accounts of Lucy’s sickness, symptoms, and treatment become very useful to him and the rest of the group, as he sends these reports to his colleague, Dr. Van Helsing, to enlist his help. His entries also help Van Helsing piece together what causes Lucy’s illness later on in the novel. Luckily, because Seward is a professional his accounts are extremely thorough and detailed.

The focus switches back to Mina- who is now in the company of Harker at a convent- as she sends letters to her sick friend, Lucy. Two of these letters are not received by Lucy before her unfortunate death, and the unopened letters underscore Mina’s silence. In order to diagnose
the problem, Van Helsing and Dr. Seward sift through Lucy’s personal papers for clues as to what caused her illness. This is the first instance where writings intended for a private audience are publicized. Although Van Helsing has his theories, they begin “the process of examining all of the documentary evidence in relation to the rest to identify the threat that has already struck” (Richards 8). Meanwhile, Mina begins to keep a journal again, for Jonathan’s sake, so after he recovers from his brain fever he can see what he missed. She does not learn of Lucy’s death until she and Jonathan are summoned to join Dr. Seward and Van Helsing. After hearing the doctors’ theories on Lucy’s death, Mina gives the men Jonathan’s journal to peruse. Soon after, Mina is fortunate enough to walk in on Seward recording a diary entry. She offers to transcribe it onto paper for him; she had already typed up her own accounts as well as her husband’s. This act is the beginning of a mass reproduction of documents that becomes important to the group’s success.

Mina’s eagerness to copy Seward’s diary sparks her interest in the compilation of all the documents in her grasp. Her “skill as a typist not only accelerates the narrative but also enhances its reliability” (Richards 10). She tells Seward that she and Jonathan are “knitting together in chronological order every scrap of evidence they have” (Stoker 199). It is here that she adds newspaper articles as secondary sources to validate some of the primary ones. She first adds clippings from the Dailygraph about the shipwreck of the Demeter and also adds the captain’s logbook. She also adds clippings from the Pall Mall Gazette and the Westminster Gazette about the escape of the wolf from the zoo and also about Lucy in her ‘undead’ state as the “bloofer (beautiful) lady”. This is another indicator of the authenticity of documents, and how that validity is important to their success in killing Dracula. Richards quotes Kittler’s “Dracula’s Legacy” when she reiterates that “Vampirism is a chain reaction and can therefore only be
fought with the techniques of mechanical text reproduction” (Richards 4). Mina is the distinguishing factor in Stoker’s novel as she is able to transcribe quickly and accurately. This introduces the idea of human versus mechanical input to Stoker’s story. The narrative that Mina compiles is dependent on the accuracy of each individual’s observations, and each narrative fills in gaps of previous accounts. As Mina and Jonathan combine all of the letters, journal entries, diary recordings, and newspaper clippings that they find relevant to the search for Dracula, the narratives become essential for a public audience, not the private one for which they were written.

Mina creates copies of the compilation for every person in the party, and they individually take and read the narratives. Once they reconvene, there are no secrets amongst them; they have all read the inner thoughts of one another. After this plot point, every letter or entry by any one person in the group is written with the intention of being transcribed and duplicated for distribution and consumption by the rest of the group, which includes Dr. Seward, Dr. Van Helsing, Mina, Jonathan, Arthur Holmwood- now Lord Godalming- and Quincey Morris. Unfortunately, soon after this group unites due to the power of their own written words, Mina is attacked by Count Dracula. He is invited into the house by Renfield, his so-called servant, and not only bites her but forces her to drink his own blood. It is during this same visit that he enters the study, and destroys the documents: “All the manuscript had been burned, and the blue flames were flickering amongst the white ashes; the cylinders of [Seward’s] phonograph too where thrown on the fire, and the wax had helped the flames” (249). It can be noted that Dracula realizes the significance of these documents, as if he understands that they are the key to his destruction.
Although the group has a copy of the manuscript in the safe, the loss of original documents is a devastating one. The importance of information still exists in the copy, but all proof of authenticity is lost in the flames. This transition from original documents to completely type-written ones makes a statement about journalism in the nineteenth century. Everything was reported by an observer and produced by machine. The authority that once lay in authenticity was surpassed by authority rooted in reliability. Mina and the men must have faith that whatever is typed in the manuscript is truth and is as close to the original documentation as possible. They continue, with this sense of faith, to follow Dracula and seek vengeance on him. They vow to kill the monster no matter what the consequences, and eventually succeed.

The last two pages of the novel are a closing statement made by Harker. He describes the trip he and Mina make to Transylvania, and explains that upon their return home, he and his wife took the papers from the safe they had been sitting in for seven years. Jonathan and Mina are “stuck with the fact that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document” and that they “could hardly ask any one…to accept [them] as proofs of so wild a story” (326-327). Mina and Jonathan compile all of the narratives and newspaper clippings in order to relive the story as accurately as if it had happened just the day before. Every journal writing, diary entry, newspaper clipping, and letter are pertinent to the story of Dracula and of his downfall. Each character’s input helped to shed light on the problem, and once compiled together helped the group use the information to their advantage. As a result, Stoker’s novel “both expresses and contains anxieties of the period, particularly those inherent to the dissemination of information” (Richards 16).
WORKS CITED


