
Epistolary: The Appearance Of Truth

About the peculiarities of Bram Stoker's Dracula

“What manner of a man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man? I feel the dread of this fear - and there is no escape for me; I am encompassed about the terrors that I dare not to think of...” (Stoker 2011: 41)

Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* is one of the most famous examples of 19th-century literature and the genre of gothic novels. Since its release in 1897, the novel's story and its idea of a vampire legend have been adapted by print, film, and television many times, some more successful than others. Part of the reason why *Dracula* was and still is so successful is its unique narrative approach. Other than most of its contemporary novels *Dracula* is written as a narrative assembly of epistolary reflections and accounts.

As Bernard Duyfhuizen (1985) states in his article *Epistolary Narratives of transmission and transgression*: “All epistolary novels contain a double narrative: a narrative of the events and a narrative of the letters that precipitate or report the events” (1). Whilst there is no doubt in this assumption to be accurate, in the case of *Dracula* (Stoker 2011), however, there is the slight issue that the main features used in the novel, in order to tell the story, are not exclusively letters. In this sense, this essay may be understood as an attempt to illustrate the consequences that appear when the perception of an epistolary narrative is taken from a general understanding to a cross-media level and how this heightens the effectiveness of the novel.

Generally speaking the use of epistolary narrative as a literary device in *Dracula* functions as an instance to create truthfulness, authenticity, and faithfulness. In the novel, the narrative – being an assembly of epistolary reflections and accounts – creates a story that is placed within the boundaries of three different media; diary entries, letters, and newspaper articles. If one, therefore, wants to pay closer attention to the narrative characteristics of *Dracula* it might be an incomplete attempt to only look at the effects that the literary device of an epistolary narrative has on the story in general. Instead one should also examine how the different media depicted within the novel effect its perception. Hence, in order to understand the whole scope of the story, it seems necessary to pay closer attention to the different media used in this novel as they create different kinds of authenticity and truthfulness.

One of the many ways in which the novel creates authenticity is wherewith it generates an intimate setting for the story to unfold itself. This can mainly be observed in the way the process of diary writing is, many times, interrupted by thoughts and current circumstances. For example, in one of Mina's diary entries, her process of writing is disturbed by the event of an old man she has been in contact with coming up to her and starting a conversation. In the narrative of the story, she interrupts her writing and returns to it when this conversation is over (76). Therefore, through Mina's writing, the reader gets the impression that Mina's actions of writing down and experiencing the events are simultaneously described in the writing. By giving the impression of being close to the experienced reality, it supplies the reader with a feeling of a momentary condition. Hence, the idea of a diary entry giving an insight into the emotions of the protagonist

creates the impression of an intimate relationship between reader and narrator.

In relation to these diary entries, the purpose of letters and newsletter articles is to further stretch the feature of reliability and faithfulness, as whilst diaries are characterised by subjectivity and emotions, letters and newspaper articles tend to have an appearance of telling and reporting objective facts. Especially newspaper articles are understood to have these features. In *Dracula*, apparent newspaper articles are often used to interweave storylines into the novel's plot that none of the novel's characters have knowledge or have been part of. What is more, however, in *Dracula* the reader even gets to read unopened letters and notes (185). So, even though letters might be understood as hybrids of the other two media, in the sense in which they transmit subjectivity and objectivity, all these circumstances might trick the reader into believing that he/she can observe everything and, therefore, knows everything connected to the story. It creates the illusion of intimacy and the appearance of truth.

However, because the story in *Dracula* does not only have one protagonist and one perspective it is told through but several, the whole story and its events are always experienced through secondary sources and only in fragments. Reading a novel with an epistolary narrative, therefore, creates a literary gap that denies the reader full access to the story it creates. Especially in Stoker's *Dracula*, it is interesting to observe how the novel's narrative always leaves the unexplainable to the unsaid, hence, the imagination. The affected (Jonathan) or infected (Lucy) are never talking themselves, once the unbearable or unspeakable happens to them (e.g. 63). This has various effects on the novel's perception but mainly it creates a condition where the reader is left with a sense of horror that reflects itself in the feeling of never getting to see the full picture and finding out the whole truth about the events.

So, not only is Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* unique in a narrative sense but also to the extent to which it uses this particular narrative to create the story. By illustrating the characteristics of Stoker's writing this essay tried to prove that, in order to understand the full scope of the story, it is necessary to not only look at an epistolary narrative approach in general but to pay closer attention to the different media used in *Dracula*, as they create different kinds of authenticity and truthfulness. By approaching Stoker's *Dracula* in this way it was discovered that a narrative assembly of epistolary reflections and accounts only creates an appearance of truth that disguises itself as objectiveness when it is, in fact, highly subjective. This subjectivity has – as it has been illustrated – several effects on the narrative but above all it heightens the effectiveness of the novel in the sense that it creates a literary gap that functions as a medium of horror and fear.

Bibliography:

1. Duyfhuizen, Bernard (1985): Epistolary Narratives of transmission and transgression in: *Comparative Literature*, Duke University Press, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 1- 26.
2. Stoker, Bram (2011): *Dracula*. Harper Press, London.