

## Language: The Exploited Weapon of *Dracula*

Annie Mitchell

As both the ability that is believed to divide animals and humans, and as the patriarchal tool of Christian Victorian England, language is the primary weapon of defense wielded by the righteous crew of men in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* against the primal, uncivilized Vampire. Where there is rapid technological change, the Gothic is never far behind. In her book *Over Her Dead Body*, Elizabeth Bronfen delves into the centrality of how language develops as technology advances, and, vitally, how these modes of communication and transmission of information were understood to be under the ownership of the patriarchally ruled West. In *Dracula*, English anxieties surrounding death, the feminine, and the foreign are expressed through developing and exploited language. Stoker demonstrates that language, as symbols that stand-in for reality, is not only faulty in the hands of the English men to whom it supposedly belongs but is unnecessary to the forces of feminine and foreign power. When language fails, not only do Stoker's gang of English men lose their only defense against the external threat, but they also lose the ability to access their own soul. Instead, Mina, perfectly strung between the linguistic masculine and the bestial feminine, holds complete power. By extrapolating the tensions of the patriarchal English and the feminine foreign to encompass the battling forces of the Judeo-Christian God and Devil, Stoker pours even more control into Mina who exists in tandem between good and evil, and, consequently, becomes an embodiment of both, taking on the qualities and abilities of each. Stoker is unable (or, perhaps, unwilling) to completely ease the anxiety of

Alight

femininity built into *Dracula* because he positions the patriarchally 'civilized' woman as holding both the linguistic power of the male West and the ungovernable ferocity innate in her femininity.

During an era of rapid industrial and technological growth, the men of Victorian England were becoming inclined to lean heavily on the tools the era was developing. The Gothic genre, however, of which *Dracula* is a shining beacon, refuses to take such radical cultural change at face value, choosing instead to delve into anxieties driven by a resurfaced ancient past. As Dr. John Seward, Jonathan Harker, Quincey Morris, Arthur Holmwood, and Abraham Van Helsing battle their anxieties of femininity, death, and the foreign over the bodies of Mina Harker and Lucy Westerna, their primary tools are those of an enlightened and scientific, though deeply pious, language-based Western context. The medium of *Dracula* in and of itself is a testament to the limitations of their ability to communicate truth; the restrictions of their technology are coterminous with the authenticity of their "evidence," which someday may be the only thing "to come between some of [them] and a rope" (Stoker 376). Unfortunately for them, the Gothic is exacting and critical of the new; it strives constantly to uncover how the past will creep in and contaminate the new with its sinister powers. By the novel's conclusion, all the meticulous recording and translation of experience and empiric somatic embodiment distinctly feels for naught: "there is hardly one authentic document," meaning they "could hardly ask anyone ... to accept these as proofs of so wild a story" (419). This hitch is alluded to throughout the novel, placing organized thought and language as the sole object of virtuous English ownership. Equally anxiety inducing to patriarchal Victorian England, however, is Mina's position of near

absolute power over their one strength; a position that she can access only because of her feminine manipulation of a masculine medium.

While language belongs resolutely to the crew of righteousness, their powers are limited to these abilities alone. The uncertainty of thought and speech articulated in language adds an additional level of anxiety. Van Helsing, for example, advises Jonathan early on to record every detail because “it may be of interest to you to see how true you guess” (156). The very journals, letters, and transcribed phonographs that comprise the novel are, therefore, guesses, whose main purpose is to stand still as the truth develops around them. Stoker develops this stagnant limitation through the language- and thought-obscuring mist of Dracula, who can so successfully manipulate his surroundings despite, or possibly because of, his distance from the linguistic form of patriarchal control. As the literal mist and mental fog of Dracula begins to overtake each member of the English crew, it hinders their ability to translate their feelings into linguistically constructed thought and to speak those thoughts out loud. After they meet to strategize their hunt, Jonathan notes how “the new phases of things leave [his] mind in a state of wonder which allows not room for active thought” (365), while Van Helsing becomes “afraid of all things – even to think” (406). Moreover, it is only after Mina is excluded from the organized knowledge of the group *and* by her own volition sees “the digression of [her] thoughts” from vampires that she “[feels] a lethargy creeping over [her]” (297) and is first targeted and drained by Dracula. Even “that sacred bell ..., those holy men ..., pretending to read books, and yet all the time their eyes never on the page” (213) clue Van Helsing into the arbitrary useless nature of empty symbols: “and all for what?” (213). Stoker slowly nourishes this disconnect between real lived experience and the symbols used by his Western characters

Alight

to express that experience until the very transmission of *Dracula* itself is called into question. Although vampires are limited by a set of rules that force them into the symbolist and linguistic structure of patriarchal Victorian England (the symbol of the cross, the need to be invited in verbally by the human), Dracula himself seems to operate at full power regardless. To compel Renfield to invite him into the asylum, Dracula “began promising [him] things – not in words but by doing them” (319). To summon his vampires and faithful humans alike, it is Dracula’s “brain [that] says ‘Come!’” (328). In a telling reversal, which reveals that the powers of darkness also create a block between conscious linguistic thought and emotional non-linguistic inner truth, in Dracula’s Transylvanian castle, Jonathan “think[s] strange things which [he does] not confess to [his] own soul” (49). This idea comes close to the heart of the issue faced by Mina's men: when linguistically dependent thought fails, the thinker is severed from access to their own soul.

By positioning these technologies of clarity and classification, primarily that of language, as the holy weapons of the patriarchal Judeo-Christian God against the unspoken, unwritable (“the... the... the... Vampire. (Why did I hesitate to write the word?)” [395]), ambiguous, and oscillating powers of the Devil and death (embodied by Dracula), Stoker plays into the Gothic trope of directly pitted good and evil. The vampire violates “notions of death as sleep before Judgement Day” and eradicates the assumption of “teleologically oriented resurrection” (Bronfen 314) in favour of the perpetual earthly revenant that corrupts “the holiest love [into] the recruiting sergeant for their ghastly ranks” (Stoker 337). *Dracula*’s righteous men are cut off from the powers of the Devil, but its women, as the sexual objects of men’s “holiest love,” are in the liminal space between the two. Mina Harker, whose body is being pulled between two extremes, is the bridge of the soul to the

written word. She is placed in the position of secretary perhaps because it is the only expected position of a New Woman in the workplace, but it is precisely through this position that Mina taps into a power held by no other character. Dr. Seward speaks the secrets of his heart, including his true sexual feelings for an already engaged Lucy Westerna, into his phonograph, but it is only Mina who has the ability to absorb the depth of emotion and feeling and translate it into the language of men:

That is a wonderful machine, but it is cruelly true. It told me, in its very tones, the anguish of your heart. It was like a soul crying out to the Almighty God. No one must hear them spoken ever again! See, I have tried to be useful. I have copied out the words on my typewriter, and none other need now hear your heart beat, as I did.

(261)

Mina places herself in the position of the “Almighty God;” she is the only interpreter of the souls of her men. Just as “there is something in woman's nature that makes a man free to break down before her and express his feelings... without feeling it derogatory to his manhood” (268), there is something in woman’s nature that holds the exclusive ability to control the transmission of feeling to patriarchal language. This feminine power sidled under the control of patriarchy certainly corrupts. For example, part of Mina’s motivation to journal is “lest it should ever be that [Jonathan] should think for a moment that [she] kept anything from him, [she] will keep [her] journal as usual. Then if he has feared of [her] trust [she] shall show it to him, with every thought of [her] heart put down for his dear eyes to read” (296). While this corruption is necessary to ease the anxiety created by the substantial power women are tapped into and redirect that influence back to patriarchal control, it is not sufficient to eliminate the anxiety all together. Van Helsing confesses that

Alight

“[they] want all her great brain which is trained like man's brain, but is of sweet woman and have a special power which the Count give her, and which he may not take away altogether – though he think not so” (381). Here lies the key to the anxiety of *Dracula's* conclusion: the powers that Mina possess do not belong to Dracula himself but may instead be an inherent virtue of femininity; a power that would then persist past the fantastical vampiric plot and be discovered in the real world of Victorian England.

Torn between two forces of strictly Gothically divided good and evil, represented by the Judeo-Christian God and the embodiment of the Devil in Dracula, the female vampire has two options. First, become the ultimate Angel of the House, fixed in eternal virtue through permanent death, adopting the nature of a “Christian saint, immune to decay,” the “good corpse [forever stagnant in] the canny rigidity of mature femininity” (Bronfen 295). Or, second, become the eternally Fallen Woman, remaining forever in “the liminal position [of the vampire,] correspond[ing] to that of the premarital bride, dangerous due to her indefinite state” (296). In his book *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture*, Bram Dijkstra classifies Mina and Lucy as the respective “success and failure of modern man's arduous attempts to acculturate woman to the civilized world” (344). Liminal in her position within the patriarchy as a pre-marital-coitus woman, Lucy has no means of avoiding the fate of the eternally polyandrous vampire whose severance from the guiding male corrupts the mother from nursing her own children to nursing *on* stolen children. During the liminality of her vampiric turning, however, pulled between the patriarchal forces of England and the foreign feminine, Lucy exists in between the ‘civility’ of language and the unspeakable animalistic. As she is turning, Lucy does not speak of her vampiric encounters to the men surrounding her, but she does write them down and hides

the paper in her breast (Stoker 181). Mina, married instantly after her husband-to-be is exposed to the threat of sexual desire and entrenched in linguistic technology of Victorian English patriarchy (vastly more so than her male counterparts), ultimately escapes the position of the dreaded eternally Fallen Woman and, as evident, becomes the (presumed) uncorrupted mother of a son, perpetuating the cycle of nourishing male power. When Lucy's virtuous counterpart is in the pits of her impending transformation, she similarly "did not speak, even when she wrote what she wished to be known later" (363). Mina is deeply attached to patriarchal organization. Even in the face of her own suicide/murder, she finds levity in language: "'euthanasia' is an excellent and comforting word! I am grateful to whoever invented it" (377). She is so entrenched, in fact, that her control over these patriarchal tools begins to creep into the periphery of the patriarchally anxious reader. Naturally to the Gothic, the anxieties that have been heaped into *Dracula* do not disappear with Lucy's death and Mina's motherhood. The "so good combination" of masculinity and femininity within Mina is certainly "fashioned ... for a purpose," but unlike Van Helsing suggests, it does not serve "the good God" but roots itself inextricably in the abilities of the evil Dracula (274). These are abilities that do not die with their master but persist through the innate qualities of femininity and spill out into Victorian England.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the expression of the deep-seated anxiety of civilized patriarchal Victorian England towards the bestial, foreign feminine. Language itself, believed to be sole property and most potent weapon of the male West, creates a rift between the lived experience of the soul and the symbols required to represent it. It is only the civilized woman, entrenched both in the abilities of language and in the innate power of her femininity, who may bridge the gap between the untouchable bestial soul and the

Alight

recorded articulation of thought. By extrapolating the attributes of the fantastical vampire to those of foreign femininity, and the abilities of the turning, liminal vampire as those of the civilized woman, Stoker articulates that the threat of *Dracula* is not fictional and can therefore not be eradicated by closing the book. The civilized New Woman may appear innocent in her secretarial mastery of language, but, simultaneously, she can never be severed from her primal feminine instincts. She becomes a new kind of creature that Victorian England must contend with: one that is useful because she is a liminal bridge between forces, but by that very definition of power is also utterly terrifying.

Works Cited

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. Manchester University Press, 2010.

Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity*. Oxford University Press, 1986.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*, edited by Glennis Byron, Broadview, 2000.