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Secrecy as Strategy in Dracula

Cover Page Footnote

This article is based on a paper presented by Jean Marigny at the Second World Dracula Congress in Romania in May 2000.

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Secrecy as Strategy in *Dracula*

Jean Marigny

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The words “secret” and “secrecy” come from the Latin form *secretum*, itself derived from the verb *secernere* which means “to separate”, “to distinguish”, “to leave out” and even “to eliminate.” Secret and secrecy play an important part in *Dracula* and it is obvious that many facts in the plot of the novel are never clearly elucidated and are often willingly left out. The reader feels as if an important part of the truth was concealed from him and whenever an explanation is given, it seems to come too late. Like detective novel writers, who let their readers devise their own hypotheses for the sake of suspense, and wait until the end to disclose the truth, Bram Stoker keeps useful information for himself. It is not known until the middle of the story, for instance, that we are openly told that Count Dracula is a vampire. Stoker’s narrative strategy is based on secrecy, not only in the way the story is told, but in the plot itself, since the protagonists often keep secrets from each other.

For the modern reader who knows even before reading the novel what Dracula is, and who knows the plot, either by hearsay or from the movies, it is obvious that there is no real secret. We must keep in mind, however, that for Stoker’s contemporaries it was quite different. They did not know what the novel was about and they enjoyed its atmosphere of mystery and suspense.

It appears that the narrative framework of *Dracula* is meant to confuse and puzzle the reader. In keeping with the tradition of Gothic masterpieces like *The Monk* by Lewis, Stoker makes use of many different narrative voices. *Dracula* is in fact a patchwork of texts including diaries, journals, letters, telegrams, reports, etc. Very often the information contained in these documents seems to have no link whatsoever with the main plot. Such facts as the tragic events on board the *Demeter*, the escape of the wolf Bersicker from London Zoo and Renfield’s medical case seem to have little to do with Harker’s experience in Transylvania. The reader, who has no explanation, is non-plussed. Moreover, unlike most earlier Gothic novels, in *Dracula* there is no omniscient narrator to help us understand what is happening. The reader has to find the truth by himself. Thus we can say that Stoker’s novel is quite modern (and perhaps even postmodern). Undoubtedly many contemporary writers of horror fiction, like Stephen King and Peter Straub, are much indebted to him.

In *Dracula* the only linear narrative is Jonathan Harker’s journal at the very beginning. Harker tells us of the events he has witnessed in a chronological order. His narrative, however, poses many questions which are left unanswered. Harker apparently does not understand what happens and the reader is puzzled when he quotes such enigmatic words uttered by Dracula as “Enter freely and of your own will” (22) -- a strange way of welcoming a guest -- or again, “Listen to them -- the children of the night. What music they make!” (25) when the howling of wolves can be heard outside. Besides, many questions are unanswered: Why does the Count appear only at night? Why is he suddenly mad at the sight of a drop of blood? Why does he refuse mirrors in his presence? Harker is dimly aware that there is something supernatural about his host, but he cannot account for the fact that Dracula does not cast a reflection in a mirror or that he can climb down a wall, with his head downward. Unlike Sutter in Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, who reads a book on vampires before he goes to Castle Dracula, Harker does not even know what the word “vampire” conveys. At the end of his journal, the reader is perplexed about the events which have been related.

Then without any transition, the reader is faced with a kaleidoscope of texts. Apart from the fact that Mina is Harker’s fiancée, the reader fails to see the connection between the journal he has just read and the exchange of letters between Mina and Lucy. Renfield’s madness, the tragedy of the *Demeter* and

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Lucy's illness are apparently irrelevant to the story. The whole narrative framework of the novel becomes a sort of jigsaw puzzle and the reader has no clue to put the parts together.

The reader is also disconcerted by cryptic remarks made by various characters, which do not seem to make sense. When asked why he likes to eat living spiders, Renfield, for instance answers: "The bride-maidens rejoice the eyes that wait the coming of the bride; but when the bride draweth nigh, then the maidens shine not to the eyes that are filled" (96-97). During Lucy's funeral, Van Helsing unexpectedly bursts out laughing and the only words he can find to explain his strange behavior are: "Keep it always with you that laughter who knock at your door and say, 'May I come in?' is not the true laughter. No! he is a king, and he come, when and how he like. He ask no person; he choose no time of suitability. He say, 'I am here'" (157).

Apart from Dracula himself, the most mysterious character in the novel is Van Helsing. He appears as the very embodiment of secrecy. As he does not keep any diary or journal, we do not know what he really has in mind. He never confides in anyone and his attitude is sometimes very strange. The reader cannot understand why this eminent university professor says, "And to superstition must we trust at the first" (284), or insists that garlic flowers be put in his patient's bedroom as if it was a matter of life and death. He does not give any explanation on Lucy's "illness" until he has made Arthur Holmwood put a stake into her heart, after she has become a vampire.

When Van Helsing finally tells the truth about vampires, there is a drastic change in the novel. The reader is now treated as an initiate: he is told everything about what is happening as if Stoker had decided to renounce his narrative strategy. Yet, we may notice that the characters keep on concealing things from each other, as they have always done. Mina, for instance, who has been infected by the vampire, will not be informed by her companions about what they are planning to do to eliminate their foe.

In fact, throughout the novel, the various protagonists use secrecy as a means of protection and keep useful information from the others. We may notice, for instance, that Harker's journal, which would be very useful to Van Helsing, is undecipherable because it was initially written in shorthand. Only Mina (an expert in shorthand) and the reader know all about Harker's experience at Castle Dracula. Apart from this journal, Harker might give evidence by word of mouth, but he refuses to allude to what happened to him in Transylvania. When he entrusts Mina with his journal, he asks her to forget all about it:

'The secret is here, and I do not want to know it. I want to take up my life here, with our marriage.... Are you willing, Wilhelmina, to share my ignorance? Here is the book. Take it and keep it, read it if you will, but never let me know; unless, indeed, some solemn duty should come upon me to go back to the bitter hours, asleep or awake, sane or mad, recorded here.' (100)

Mina complies and decides to seal the journal with wax. It is not until Lucy's death that she decides at last to read it:

I must not ask him, for fear I shall do more harm than good; but I must somehow learn the fact of his journey abroad. The time is come, I fear, when I must open that parcel and know what is written. (156)

Generally speaking, in *Dracula*, when the truth is disclosed about some mystery, it is of no avail because it comes too late. Very often, the reason why a secret is kept from a character is quite legitimate, but it results nevertheless in a disaster as, for instance, in the case of Lucy's mother: because of her own poor health Mrs. Westenra is kept in ignorance of her daughter's real state. Thus, Arthur writes to Dr. Seward:

Lucy is ill; that is, she has no special disease, but she looks awful, and is getting worse every day. I have asked her if there is any cause; I do not dare to ask her mother, for to disturb the poor lady's mind about her daughter in her present state of health would be fatal. Mrs. Westenra has

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confided to me that her doom is spoken -- disease of the heart -- though poor Lucy does not know it yet. (104)

As a consequence, Mrs. Westenra, by sheer ignorance, endangers Lucy's life by removing the garlic flowers from her bedroom and opening her window. Van Helsing can only give the sad conclusion to this sad situation: "This poor mother, all unknowing, and all for the best as she think, does such thing as lose her daughter body and soul, and we must not tell her, we must not even warn her, or she die, and then both die" (124).

For almost similar reasons, Van Helsing asks Seward not to tell Arthur Holmwood about the sudden aggravation of Lucy's illness: "Better he not know as yet; perhaps he shall never know. I pray so; but if it be needed, then he shall know all" (111).

In the second half of the novel, it is Mina's turn to be kept in ignorance: for reasons of security, Van Helsing and his friends decide not to inform her about what they are doing. The young woman has to accept although she is sad that her own husband should keep secrets from her:

Poor dear fellow! I suppose it must have distressed him even more than it did me. They all agreed that it was best that I should not be drawn further into this awful work, and I acquiesced. But to think that he keeps anything from me! (226)

Later on, Mina herself decides to keep secrets from the others: she does not describe her strange dreams -- which could be very useful -- to Van Helsing and Dr. Seward because she does not want to disturb them:

I must be careful of such dreams, for they would unseat one's reason if there were too much of them. I would get Dr. Van Helsing or Dr. Seward to prescribe something for me which would make me sleep, only that I fear to alarm them. Such a dream at the present time would become woven into their fears for me. (228)

Bram Stoker's novel is thus made up of a network of small secrets and white lies which hinder or delay the solution to the main problems. As a result, each protagonist only knows a part of the truth. This situation results in *quid pro quos* and *coups de théâtre* which keep suspense running.

Dracula himself is of course the most secretive character in the novel. Everybody speaks of him, but he appears only in a few episodes. Apart from Van Helsing, he is practically the only protagonist who does not keep a diary or a journal, and the words he utters are always reported by the others, so that nobody knows exactly what he thinks. Conversely, he takes advantage of the strategy of secrecy used by his enemies, especially Van Helsing. This is perhaps the main contradiction of the novel: whenever a character uses secrecy to protect someone else, he or she only succeeds in making things worse. In other words, when secrecy is used on purpose it can have tragic consequences and it is not always justified by sheer necessity.

At the beginning of the novel, for instance, the natives who know all about vampires try to prevent Harker from going to Castle Dracula, but as they refuse to explain why, they fail to convince him. The owner of the Golden Krone Hotel, for instance, knows the Count perfectly, but when Harker asks him questions, "he seemed somewhat reticent, and pretended he could not understand my German" (12). Later on, when Harker asks him and his wife whether they are acquainted with Dracula, "both he and his wife crossed themselves, and saying they knew nothing at all, simply refused to speak further" (12). At the moment of Harker's departure, the landlord's wife tries to warn him for the last time but as she merely says, "Do you know where you are going?" (12), her warning is entirely useless. The next day, the driver of the coach has a similar attitude: he knows the dangers that are awaiting Harker but he also remains quite vague about them. The only information Harker can gather from the other passengers is through their conversation in a foreign language which he does not really understand. He can hear such words as *vrolok* and *vlkoslak* which either mean "werewolf" or "vampire", but as he does not know what a vampire can be, this kind of information is of no use to him. Moreover, we can notice that the word "vampire",

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used here for the first time in the novel, will appear again much later when Quincey Morris speaks of a variety of bats living in America which seem to have little to do with Count Dracula.

Apart from the stubborn attitude of the natives who cannot prevent Harker from going to his fate only because they refuse to speak out, what is also illogical in the novel is Van Helsing's own behavior insofar as he keeps on concealing the truth from the other characters. Such a strategy, based on an absurd, useless sense of secrecy, only results in leaving Lucy unprotected in front of her enemy. We might of course understand his refusal to inform his patient for plausible medical reasons, but we can hardly accept the fact that he also keeps her physician, Dr. Seward, in ignorance. We may surmise that from the very first examination of Lucy, Van Helsing knows perfectly well what she is ailing from. He knows it is a matter of life and death but when the young doctor asks him what he has in mind, he refuses to answer: "He would not give me further clue" (107). Several days later, Van Helsing says to his former student, "I have for myself thoughts at the present. Later I shall unfold to you" (111). Seward logically insists to be informed immediately: "Why not now? ... It may do some good; we may arrive at some decision" (111). But the professor merely replies that the time has not yet come for such a revelation. Later, when the professor sees pinpricks on Lucy's throat and keeps his conclusion to himself, Seward asks him about the nature of these marks. Van Helsing only replies with a question: "What do you make of it?" (115). He does not give any explanation to his former student when he orders garlic flowers to be put in the patient's bedroom and when Seward asks him about the meaning of Lucy's nightmares, the professor answers, "Do not trouble about it now. Forget it for the present. You shall know and understand it all in good time; but it will be later" (137).

As there is no apparent reason to delay the revelation of the truth, Van Helsing's attitude puzzles the other protagonists who sometimes have doubts about his sanity. As we have seen, Van Helsing's method of complete secrecy is not only inefficient but potentially harmful. We may suppose that if he had explained to Dr. Seward that Lucy was in fact the victim of a vampire, some tragic mistakes would have been avoided. Lucy would have never been left alone in her bedroom, the garlic flowers would have efficiently protected her and, with the window closed, Dracula would have not been able to come in.

In fact, Van Helsing seems to be obsessed by the idea of keeping things secret, as if he was himself suffering from a strange paranoia. Even after Lucy's death, when there is no more reason to conceal the truth, he retains his strategy. When, for instance, he asks Mina to inform him about Lucy, he entreats her not to say anything to anybody: "I must keep it private for the present from all" (161). Later, when Van Helsing decides to destroy the vampire Lucy, he asks Arthur and Quincey Morris to give him a free hand without explaining what he is about to do: "I want your permission to do what I think good this night. It is, I know, much to ask; and when you know what it is I propose to do you will know, and only then, how much" (182).

Van Helsing's obsession with secrecy, especially when it apparently serves no real purpose, makes him appear, to some extent, as a monomaniac. In that respect, Coppola's interpretation of the character, played by Anthony Hopkins, is not as exaggerated as it might seem. Van Helsing has definitely something of the mad scientist.

Whatever we can say about it, it seems obvious that the systematic use of secrecy in the narrative framework and the plot of *Dracula* is not always justified. Of course, it allows the author to endow his story with an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, and this is what appeals to many readers of the novel, but at the same time it tends to create situations which are artificial, inconsistent, and unbelievable. This can be seen as a major flaw in the novel and, for that reason, in spite of one's admiration for this unique novel, one is tempted to agree with Royce MacGillivray that *Dracula* is a "spoiled masterpiece."

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