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Abstract:

Dracula has long been read as a novel engaging late-Victorian concerns about sex and sexuality, race, and immigration, but little attention has been paid to the ways the novel grapples with epistemological questions of facts and facticity that persist throughout the period.

Keywords: Dracula; Victorian; Epistemology

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“In God’s name, what does it all mean?”: Epistemological Crisis in Dracula

I

In the editor’s preface to his delightful New Annotated Dracula, Leslie S. Klinger describes how his editorial apparatus is guided by a “gentle fiction[:] that the events described in Dracula ‘really took place’ and that the work presents the recollections of real persons, whom Stoker has renamed and whose papers . . . he has recast, ostensibly to conceal their identities” (xii). Klinger’s “gentle fiction” leads him to a number of interesting insights about the text, largely because it highlights the ways that the reader’s condition is similar to that of the novel’s protagonists. As Neil Gaiman explains in his introduction to the New Annotated Dracula, the novel’s deployment of the distributed narrative structure (the same sort popularized by Wilkie Collins) results in an ergodic narrative:

We know only what the characters know, and the characters neither write down all they know, nor know the significance of what they do tell.

So it’s up to the reader to decide what’s happening in Whitby; to connect Renfield’s rants and behaviour in the asylum with the events that happen in the house next door; to decide what Dracula’s true

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1 The connection between Dracula and The Woman in White has not gone unnoticed. Katrien Bollen and Raphael Ingelbien note that “To late-Victorian reviewers, the ‘fragmentary’ form of Dracula was neither experimental nor proto-modernist . . . but simply harked back to a well-tried formula of sensation fiction” (405). They go on to explain that “in 1894, Chatto and Windus started reprinting Collins’s works in cheap six-penny editions. The first print run of The Woman in White was 100,000 copies, and with the reprints that followed, more than 200,000 new copies of the novel were put on the market in the 1890s. While Dracula appeared in a more limited and expensive format in 1897, Stoker soon started preparing the text for the six-penny edition that duly came out in 1901, thus reinforcing the perception that he was following in Collins’s footsteps” (405).
motives are. It’s also up to the reader to decide whether Van Helsing knows anything about medicine, whether Dracula crumbles to dust at the end, or even, given the combination of kukri knife and bowie knife that, unconvincingly, finishes the vampire off, whether he simply transmutes into fog and vanishes. (xvi-xvii)

*Dracula* constantly draws attention to the ways that knowledge is created and certainty determined. In many ways, these questions about epistemology are central to the novel. As I argue, *Dracula* engages these questions as a way of interrogating the very nature of facticity itself.

The novel’s concerns with epistemology have not gone unnoticed. In “Mass Production and the Spread of Information in *Dracula*,” Leah Richards argues that the novel enacts certain late-Victorian anxieties about newspapers and the proliferation of information in the late 19th century. As Richards explains, *Dracula* is “a novel that both expresses and contains anxieties of the period, particularly those inherent to the dissemination of information” (455). Similarly, Rosemary Jann reads *Dracula* as a text that attempts to be critical of “science’s claim to establish empirical methods as the sole standard of truth” (274) but which returns, in the end, to science and materialism as the only successful means of apprehending what is happening in the novel. While these two readings focus on different elements of *Dracula*, both detect in the novel a fundamental anxiety of the late Victorian period: in an age of proliferating information and constantly shifting epistemological grounds, certainty, facts, and knowledge become impossibly compromised.

Before I begin my discussion, I want to take a moment to differentiate this
position from other, perhaps similar, ones. We have long imagined that the Victorians experienced a “crisis of faith” somewhere in the middle of the century. The examples of this crisis are typically the same (e.g. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” Hardy’s “Hap”)—this crisis is also encoded in our anthologies—the Norton includes a section on it, as does the Broadview anthology.) But Tennyson's or Arnold's difficulties coming to terms with their religious beliefs are hardly representative of the entire culture; most Victorians lived their lives completely unaffected by any crisis of faith that Tennyson or Arnold happened to be experiencing. As Frank Turner reminds us in “The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That was Lost,” modern readers should not assume that the Victorian narratives from the that we have inherited—both fictional and other—constitute an “unproblematic record” (10). This is not to say that the Victorian period—and especially that period between the publication of Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, between 1830 and 1833 and the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859—did not witness a series of scientific advancements that amounted to a profound assault on superstition and religiosity. But I argue that this Victorian crisis of faith is actually the most visible element of a much deeper crisis of facts and facticity. In this essay, I will argue that *Dracula* enacts and interrogates this late Victorian epistemological crisis.

II

*Dracula* begins with a sometimes-overlooked and occasionally-unpublished epigraph:

> How these papers have been placed into sequence will be made clear
in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so
that a history almost at variance with the possibility of latter-day belief
may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of
past events 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 epigraph is playing on the familiar gothic trope of the found manuscript. In this
sense, the epigraph indicates a generic self-awareness on Stoker’s part, and thus it
indicates that Dracula is well aware of its generic obligations and origins. Unlike the
Gothic tendency to use the found manuscript trope as an invitation to suspend
disbelief, the epigraph of Dracula asserts not that the manuscript was found, but that
it was assembled. Their origin and purpose, the epigraph asserts, will become clear

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2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Dracula are from the Norton Critical edition.
3 For instance, the “translator’s preface” to the first edition of Walpole’s Castle of Otranto (1764)
informs us that the novel we hold in our hands was “found in the library of an ancient Catholic family
in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529. How much
sooner it was written does not appear. The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest
ages of Christianity; but the language and conduct have nothing that savours of barbarism. The style is
the purest Italian.” (3) We learn, of course, in the preface to the second edition, that this was Walpole’s
ruse. Pretending that the novel was translated from 16th century Italian afforded Walpole some
protection should his experiment fail: “THE FAVOURABLE manner in which this little piece has been
received by the public, calls upon the author to explain the grounds on which he composed it. But,
before he opens those motives, it is fit that he should ask pardon of his readers for having offered his
work to them under the borrowed personage of a translator. As diffidence of his own abilities and the
novelty of the attempt, were the sole inducements to assume the disguise, he flatters himself he shall
appear excusable. He resigned the performance to the impartial judgement of the public; determined to
let it perish in obscurity, if disproved; nor meaning to avow such a trifle, unless better judges should
pronounce that he might own it without blush.” (9). Radcliffe’s The Italian begins with the tale of
English travelers in Italy in 1764 who are given the written account of an assassin’s confession (1–4).
We see this strategy of pretending that a text is not a work of fiction often repeated in 18th-century
literature (e.g. Robinson Crusoe, Pamela, Clarissa).

4 Jennifer Fleissner reads this assembly within the context of an emerging secretarial class of women’s
labor in the late Victorian period.
The Victorian

as we read them ("How these papers have been placed into sequence will be made clear in the reading of them"). This epigraph, which claims to illuminate, actually raises a number of questions that lie at the heart of the novel. The most obvious question is who is arranging the papers. But other question quickly emerge. What does it mean that “needless matters have been eliminated”? What constitutes “needless”? What does the writer mean by “history”? And what constitutes a history “almost at variance” with “latter-day belief”? Finally, we must ask why the papers have been arranged at all.

_Dracula_ is a novel of incredible paranoia, and over the course of reading it, we learn that Mina and Jonathan have placed the documents in this order both as a means of constructing a narrative record of the protagonists’ battle with Dracula and as a way of compiling the evidence for the their claims.⁵ There are explicit references to the need for such a record. For instance, after Mrs. Westenra’s death, Van Helsing approaches Seward to discuss covering up the specifics of it:

I came to speak about the certificate of death. If we do not act properly and wisely, there may be an inquest, and that paper would have to be produced. I am in hopes that we need have no inquest, for if we had it would surely kill poor Lucy, if nothing else did. I know, and you know, and the other doctor who attended her knows, that Mrs.

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⁵ As Rosemary Jann suggests, there is a relationship in this novel between writing and what constitutes a fact: “For all the major characters, the recording of events implicitly endows experience with the authority of ‘fact.’ It is as if the very act of ordering details and writing them down verifies the experience as authentic, even if its meaning is not fully understood at the time” (278). Jann also notes that “The narrative repeatedly foregrounds the technology of information management in such a way as to reinforce the implicit equation of recorded fact with a ‘truth’ that defines and eventually yields control over reality” (279).
The Victorian

Westenra had disease of the heart, and we can certify that she died of it. Let us fill up the certificate at once, and I shall take it myself to the registrar and go on to the undertaker. (137)

As Nina Auerbach notes about this scene, “the two doctors are engaging in a cover-up of the bizarre and violent circumstances of Mrs. Westenra’s death, protecting not only Lucy but themselves” (Stoker 137n). In Lucy Westenra’s memorandum, she describes her mother’s death: after joining her daughter in bed, Mrs. Westenra is startled when a “flapping and buffeting” (Stoker 131) sound comes from the window. This is followed by the window being shattered by a “great, gaunt grey wolf” (Stoker 131):

My mother cried out in a fright, and struggled up into a sitting posture, and clutched wildly at anything that would help her. Amongst other things, she clutched the wreath of flowers that Dr Van Helsing insisted on my wearing round my neck, and tore it away from me. For a second or two she sat up, pointing at the world, and there was a strange and horrible gurgling in her throat; then she fell lover, as if struck with lightning, and her head hit my forehead and made me feel dizzy for a moment or two. . . . I tried to stir, but there was some spell upon me, and dear mother’s poor body, which seemed to grow cold already—for her dear heart had ceased to beat—weighed me down; and I remembered no more for a while. (Stoker 131)

Mrs. Westenra is killed, we are to believe, by some telekinetic power Dracula possesses. Seward’s response to this narrative is in keeping with the novel’s interest
in facts and their interpretation. As he watches Van Helsing read Lucy’s note, Seward asks “In God’s name, what does it all mean?” (136). This is the central question for all the characters in the novel—and for the reader, as well. As the epigraph implies, the accumulation of papers that comprise the novel is an attempt to explain “what does it all mean,” but this explanation can only be accomplished in hindsight and after selectively editing the evidence.

But for Van Helsing, Mrs. Westenra’s death requires them to create a false death certificate in order to stave off an inquest. Thus, the official record—the authentic death certificate that will be a matter of public record—is itself a fraud. This is not the only time that there is an anxiety about the legality of the protagonists’ actions. When the crew use Mina to track Dracula’s return to Transylvania so they can ambush him, Jonathan explains their plan:

We have already arranged what to do in case we get the box open. If the Count is there, Van Helsing and Seward will cut off his head at once and drive a stake through his heart. Morris and Godalming and I shall prevent interference, even if we have to use the arms which we shall have ready. The Professor says that if we can so treat the Count’s body, it will soon after fall into dust. In such case there would be no evidence against us, in case any suspicion of murder were aroused. But even if it were not, we should stand or fall by our act, and perhaps some day this very script may be evidence to come between some of us and a rope. (290)

Van Helsing and the rest of the crew are clearly aware that they are killing something
that is, at least, passing for a human. Additionally, they are aware that if they kill Dracula in just the right manner, his remains will “fall into dust,” thus leaving “no evidence against” them. But it admission here of the possibility that his death might raise the “suspicion of murder” is telling, for it suggests that Jonathan acknowledges the possibility that Dracula’s body may not actually “fall into dust”—and thus may be wrong in their assumptions.

_Dracula_ is at times such a compelling text—in large part because the papers have been arranged in such a way that the story seems utterly plausible—that it is often easy to forget what is happening in the novel. As its epigraph asserts, _Dracula_ purports to be a collection of manuscripts documenting the experiences of a group whose members become convinced that Dracula is a monster. Of course, the only evidence we have for this claim is provided by the group, and they admit that they have arranged it to support their claims about Dracula—and that the claims they are making are “almost at variance with the possibility of latter-day belief.”

We see the anxiety about the believability of this narrative expressed again in Harker's note at the end of the novel. He describes looking back over the mass of material the crew has assembled:

I took the papers from the safe where they have been ever since our return so long ago. We were struck with the fact that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing, except the later notebooks of Mina and Seward and myself, and Van Helsing’s memorandum. We could hardly ask anyone, even did we wish to, to
accept these as proofs of so wild a story. Van Helsing’s summed it all up as he said, with our boy on his knee:--

"We want no proofs; we ask none to believe us!" (326-27)

The novel is framed by statements about its implausibility—the first in the epigraph’s claim that the story is “almost at variance with the possibility of latter-day belief” and the last with Harker’s admission here that “We could hardly ask anyone . . . to accept these as proofs of so wild a story” (326-27). Van Helsing’s statement seems to be an attempt to mitigate any doubts about the believability of the story (by, apparently, force of will), but it actually calls attention to the novel’s problems with believability and the characters’ anxieties about whether, given the evidence that they provide, their story could be believed if there were an inquest into why a group of people suddenly decided to hunt and kill a Transylvanian aristocrat who was attempting to purchase a house in London. While *Dracula* is certainly concerned with how information can be collected, organized, and understood, it can also be read as a response to the proliferation of information during the period, which resulted in a profound anxiety over the inability to be certain about what they could be certain about.

Leah Richards points to this problem of certainty in her reading of the novel’s epigraph, which she claims expresses Harker’s fear that “the mechanically mass-produced and reproduced pages . . . lack the authority of the original, often handwritten, accounts” (442). As she goes on to note, much of this anxiety in the novel hinges on such matters of “authenticity”:

. . . why would a fantastic tale of the undead bear any greater credence
just because a group’s version of events were supported by original records rather than mechanically reproduced, uniform documents?

This inconsistency emphasizes that the text, ostensibly a tribute to the modern age, is also enacting anxieties about the age, specifically the technological spread of information, none of which is authentic when it reaches its audience. (442)

As Richards explains, *Dracula* is a compilation of documents whose authority flows from the claim that they are reproductions of “authentic” originals. As she notes, Mina’s “skill as a typist not only accelerates the narrative but also enhances its reliability” since “typewriters are perceived as ‘the pre-eminent modern symbol of written truth’ and have been since their introduction in the late nineteenth-century” (Richards 449). In an even more fundamental way, the very act of recording these events validates the characters’ experience. As Jann puts it, “the recording of events implicitly endows experience with the authority of a ‘fact.’ It is as if the very act of ordering details and writing them down verifies the experience as authentic, even if its meaning is not fully understood at the time” (Jann 278). This notion that the characters cannot understand the meaning—that is, that they cannot see their contribution as part of a larger narrative—is crucial, for it is the hallmark of the modern condition that the novel explores. This condition is in many ways an outgrowth of Collins’s brand of sensation fiction: individuals often cannot understand their part in a much larger narrative and in the late-Victorian age of information proliferation, the process of determining relevance becomes exponentially more
difficult. In the end, only the reader (and, of course, Jonathan and Mina, who are assembling the documentary evidence) has adequate perspective to understand the totality of the narrative.

III

Relatively few critics have attended to the ways that Dracula engages questions about the nature of facts. Jennifer Wicke highlights the vampiric significance of “mass culture” in the novel: “the social force most analogous to Count Dracula’s as depicted in the novel is none other than mass culture, the developing technologies of the media in its many forms, as mass transport, tourism, photography and lithography in image production, and mass produced narrative” (469). Attending to the novel’s fictional-material conditions, Wicke points out that “the crucial fact is that all of these narrative pieces eventually comprising the manuscript we are said to have in our hands emanate from radically dissimilar and even state-of-the-art forms. Dracula, draped in all its feudalism and medieval gore, is textually completely au courant” (469-70). As Wicke argues, Dracula “is an articulation of, a figuration for, that same mass culture . . . which are shown to be limited in scope unless taken together” (475). Wicke is certainly correct insofar as Dracula clearly engages and Dracula embodies various technological anxieties, but I want to suggest in this essay that these anxieties are themselves only adjunct to the condition that this proliferation

6 As David Seed puts it, Harker’s journal “gives the reader a ‘memory,’ a store of images that enables him to interpret the fragmentary signs that fill characters’ later accounts. Their very incapacity to analyze their accounts . . . compels them to be as accurate as they can” (65). The result, Seed rightly notes, is that “The reader is thus invited to make a series of recognitions, to spot resemblances between later events” and earlier ones (66).
of information technologies exacerbated. The proliferation of information, vampiric as it may be in Wicke’s eyes, is less significant than what it leads to: a profound uncertainty about what they knew to be true.

In “Saved by Science?: The Mixed messages of Stoker’s Dracula,” Rosemary Jann argues that despite the novel’s “proclam[ations about] the power of belief, faith and imagination, [...] the plot makes these dependent on logic, deduction, and proof for their ultimate success” (273). Jann goes on to discuss the various ways that Dracula attempts to reconcile the late Victorian anxieties about science and faith, noting how Van Helsing contends that “the rigid line . . . between science and superstition is an an artificial one and that all forms of knowledge are advanced by having faith” (276). Such incoherence in the novel’s position is emblematic of the issues that I am attempting to highlight here. But it is only incoherent if one reads Dracula as an attempt to reconcile faith and science. This incoherence is less a failure than it is an indication of the novel’s interrogation of the ways science and faith produce—and delimit—knowledge.

Anxieties about science in the period were of course very real, and there has been an enormous amount of scholarly attention to matters of faith and science in the 19th century. In Darwin Among the Novelists (1988), George Levine describes how Darwin’s theory of evolution challenged traditional notions of natural permanence—in a post-Darwinian world, species are no longer permanent forms; they are always in the process of transforming into something else. Thus, as Levine explains,
“Categories become fictions, historical and conventional constructions, mere stopgaps subject to the empirical” (17). While Levine sees this as the beginning of a significant transformation in the structure and interests of novels (for instance, realist narratives emphasizing “change and development,” character being implicated in individual history, and a suspicion of comedic narrative closure) the notion of “categories becoming fictions” can be used as a way of examining the various levels of anxiety about facts and facticity associated with Darwin’s theory.8

We can see this anxiety in Harker’s description of watching Dracula climb down the castle wall. As he leans out his window, he explains that he sees an impossible scene:

> What I saw was the Count’s head coming out from the window. I did not see the face, but I know the man by the neck and the movement of his back and arms. In any case I could not mistake the hands which I had had so many opportunities of studying. I was at first interested and somewhat amused, for it is wonderful how small a matter will interest and amuse a man when he is a prisoner. (39)

Harker notes that this is taking place “a storey below me, and somewhat to my left, where I imagined, from the lie of the rooms, that the windows of the Count’s own room would look out” (39). Harker’s certainty is odd. As he admits, he does not actually see the Count’s face; he recognizes him, preposterously, “by the neck” and “the movement of his back and arms” as well as by “the hands” which he “could not

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8 See especially Levine’s opening chapter, “Darwin Among the Novelists.”
The Victorian mistake” (39). Thus, even what Jonathan reports to have seen with his own eyes is, at the very least, suspect.

The problems with what Harker believes he is seeing become even worse once Harker is convinced that Dracula climbs down the outside of the castle:

But my feelings changed to repulsion and terror when I saw the whole man slowly emerge from the window and begin to crawl down down the castle wall over that dreadful abyss, face down, with his cloak spreading out around him like great wings. At first I could not believe my eyes. I thought it was some trick of the moonlight, some weird effect of shadow; but I kept looking, and it could be no delusion. I saw the fingers and toes grasp the corners of the stones, worn clear of the mortar by the stress of years, and by thus using every projection and inequality move downwards with considerable speed, just as a lizard moves along a wall. (39)

It is particularly interesting here to watch Harker’s taxonomy for Dracula break down. Dracula is, at first, “the whole man,” but then ceases to be associated with a personal pronoun altogether. Dracula’s fingers and toes become, simply, “the fingers and toes” (emphasis mine) as Harker overtly associates his movements with those of a lizard. While Harker is in a sense vivisecting Dracula here—transforming him from the “whole man” into his constituent parts—he is also devolving Dracula from human to lizard. As Auerbach notes, such a devolution of Count Dracula from aristocrat to lizard “aligns the vampire with those monstrous proofs of Darwinian evolution, dinosaurs—which Victorian scientists classified as reptiles—rather than with the
mammalian bat” (39n). But this association does more than simply conjure up the specter of Darwinian evolution; it invokes the ways that Darwin’s theory of evolution marked a significant reconfiguration of Victorian taxonomies. Harker’s association here invokes not just anxieties about Darwin, but a more general taxonomic breakdown in the period.

We can see the text engaging this crisis clearly when Harker attempts to determine what, precisely, Dracula is: “What manner of man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man? I feel the dread of this horrible place overpowering me; I am in fear—in awful fear—and there is no escape for me; I am encompassed about with terrors that I dare not think of . . .” (39). The “repulsion and terror” (39) that had earlier troubled Harker is perhaps explained here. What Harker sees defies what he knows to be acceptable and defined categories of “human.” Dracula’s ability to move like a lizard means that he defies those categories—and that which cannot be placed within a clearly-defined category, that which threatens to upend what we know to be possible, is a threat to what constitutes knowledge itself. Harker’s “revulsion and terror,” then, result from the taxonomical crisis that Dracula represents.9

We see a similar failure of taxonomy in the log of the Demeter. The early entries insist that “something” is on board (“crew dissatisfied about something” [81];

9 Harriet Ritvo begins her study of order and taxonomy in the Victorian mind, The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination, with a description of a Punch cartoon from 1869: a railway porter informs a woman traveling with her pets that “Station Master say, mum, as cats is ‘dogs,’ and rabbits is ‘dogs,’ and so’s parrots; but this ere ‘tortis’ is an insect, so there ain’t no charge for it!” (x).
“Mate could not make out what was wrong; they only told him there was *something*, and crossed themselves” [81]; “All said they expected something of the kind, but would not say more than that there was *something* aboard” [81]) and the later entries describe Dracula merely as “it’:

> It is here; I know it, now. On the watch last night I saw It, like a man, tall and thin, and ghostly pale. It was in the bows, and looking out, I crept behind It, and gave It my knife; but the knife went through It, empty as the air. And as he spoke he took his knife and drove it savagely into space. Then he went on: “But It is here, and I’ll find It. It is in the hold, perhaps, in one of those boxes.” (83)

In his gloss on this passage, Clive Leatherdale claims that “The captain capitalizes ‘It,’ suggesting that he too fears the devil is aboard” (145n). While this assumption is plausible, Leatherdale’s note ignores the taxonomical crisis that this scene depicts. The sailors do not know what is on the *Demeter* with them, and, like Ann Radcliffe’s distinction between terror and horror, that lack of knowledge makes the situation all the more frightening. As with Harker’s experience in Dracula’s castle, taxonomies surrounding Dracula break down. He is “like a man,” but something other than a man—yet what he is, precisely, the language cannot accommodate; Dracula is simply “something” and “it.” Even, in the end, when only the captain remains, we see the conflict between his clear taxonomies and the challenge to them that Dracula represents: “. . . in the dimness of the night I saw It—Him! . . . . But I shall baffle this fiend or monster, for I shall tie my hands to the wheel when my strength begins to fail, and along with them I shall tie that which He—It!—dare not touch” (84). The
vacillation here between “he” and “it,” “fiend or monster” indicates Dracula’s defiance of taxonomy, which in turn raises questions about the adequacy of those categories. If Dracula cannot be contained in the current categories, then those categories must be inadequate.

We see taxonomies fail again when Dr. Seward, discussing Renfield, notes that Renfield defies the current system of classification:

> The thought that has been buzzing about my brain lately is complete, and the theory proved. My homicidal maniac is of a peculiar kind. I shall have to invent a new classification for him, and call him zoophagous (life-eating) maniac. . . . (71)

Renfield’s attempt to achieve immortality “in a cumulative way” (71)—and “cumulative” suggests taxonomical and hierarchical groupings in an order that we are not privy to—is not in keeping with the expectations of a homicidal maniac’s behavior, and thus a new category must be created.

If taxonomies allow us to classify knowledge and to organize it, they also determine what is knowable and allowable within and about certain categories. As Foucault famously puts it in his preface to *The Order of Things* with his humorous description of Borges’s “Chinese encyclopedia,” “In the wonderment of this taxonomy, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*” (xv). Dracula defies the categories that Harker, Seward, and the captain and crew of the *Demeter* have available to place him in, and in defying understanding, he raises questions both about the potential inadequacies of their categories and about
what it is possible to understand. Thus, in the category of “human” or “homicidal maniac” or any other of the categories whose breakdown Dracula details, we see characters forced to confront the inadequacy of their taxonomies. Taxonomies do more than merely allow us to organize information; they determine what is understandable and knowable.

IV

As categories become problematic or unviable, new ones must be created; the result is a proliferation both of information and the means by which it might be organized. This is in many ways a problem of hermeneutics. Until the characters (and readers) understand the nature of the problem they are facing, they cannot know what details are relevant. Their solution, as Van Helsing explains to Seward, is to keep a record of everything. For Van Helsing, this record is crucial to a distinction between knowledge and memory:

Remember, my friend, that knowledge is stronger than memory, and we should not trust the weaker. Even if you have not kept the good practice, let me tell you that this case of our dear miss is one that may be—mind, I say may be—of such interest to us and others that all the rest may not make him kick the beam, as your peoples say. Take good note of it. Nothing is too small. I counsel you you, put down in record even your doubts and surmises. Hereafter it may be of interest to you to see how true you guess. We learn from failure, not from success!

(112)

Van Helsing’s distinction here between knowledge and memory hinges on the act of
recording observations, and his valorization of recording information certainly suggests the slow accumulation of information associated with the inductive reasoning of the sciences.\textsuperscript{10} For Van Helsing, “memory” is the unrecorded and the fallible while “knowledge” results from the accumulation of information. These recorded observations possess a certain level of authority that unrecorded memories do not possess.

Leah Richards associates this phenomenon with journalism: “Everything [of the protagonists’ records that remains at the end of the novel] is reported by an observer and produced by machine; while nothing is authentic in the sense of original or personal, the authority that once lay in authenticity—what Walter Benjamin identifies as the ‘aura’—has been superseded by authority rooted in reliability” (451). The act of writing the information down, for Van Helsing, transforms it from the memory to knowledge—which, it seems reasonable to assume, is synonymous with “fact.” “Facts,” in other words, are associated with observation and experience. This distinction aligns nicely with a shift in the notion of a “fact”—a word that Mary Poovey explains had once meant an “event or occurrence” or “a particular truth known by actual observation” and was coming to mean something more along the lines of “evidence of some theory” (9).

\textsuperscript{10} As Jann puts it, “Van Helsing substitutes faith for [Sherlock] Holmes’s strict agnosticism, but hardly trusts in belief alone. Observation, deduction, and hypothesis testing—the tools of the scientist as well as the detective—are crucial to the process by which the believers triumph. The very magnitude of their task . . . makes the process of observation crucial. . . . [O]nly by eliminating false hypotheses does the scientists arrive at the correct one” (280-81n). This is a slightly odd claim, since Van Helsing seems to already know that Dracula is a vampire. Additionally, Van Helsing’s concerns with the group’s record-keeping are, by his own admission, less about inductive logic than they are about providing a record of their activities in case they are arrested.
Of course, what *Dracula* purports to be a description of “simple fact” that is “almost at variance with . . . latter-day belief” (Stoker 5) is hardly a kind of authoritative chronicling of events. As the epigraph acknowledges, the fictional set of papers that comprise *Dracula* have been “placed in sequence” with some materials having been “eliminated” (5). As categories break down and narratives are pieced together across multiple sources, there is simply no way to know what bits of “knowledge” are important, and so “Nothing is too small” to merit recording. In the end, the only way the protagonists can render their experience comprehensible is to remove the parts that challenge comprehension. The result of this kind of thinking is, of course, the particularly paranoid structure of *Dracula*—by which I simply mean that the novel is an assemblage of documents in an attempt to justify the behavior of the crew of light. As the epigraph suggests, the novel is constructed only after those “needless matters” have been removed from the documents assembled by the crew before they were entirely certain which ones would be important. The result is that the act of assembling the documents that will make up *Dracula* is an act of paranoia; when we cannot be certain what is important, everything potentially is. This is the condition of the late Victorian information ecology.

The novel raises a series of questions about not just what is important but what is actually knowable—or worth knowing—at all. We see this clearly when Van Helsing chides Seward’s unwillingness to accept the idea that Lucy has been the victim of a vampire:

> You are clever man, friend John; you reason well, and your wit is bold; but you are too prejudiced. You do not let your eyes see nor your ears
hear, and that which is outside your daily life is not of account to you.

Do you not think that there are things which you cannot understand, and yet which are; that some people see things that others cannot? But there are things old and new which must not be contemplated by men’s eyes, because they know—or think they know—some things which other men have told them. Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain. (170-71)

Van Helsing’s reproof here is indicative of the kind of crisis of facticity that Dracula engages. But Van Helsing is also remarking here on one of the problems with induction: if induction requires the accumulation of new bits of evidence, the individual must be receptive to those new pieces of evidence. Otherwise, the conclusions reached will be based, as John Stuart Mill warns about those who use mere custom as a guide, on an “experience [that is] too narrow” (65).

Van Helsing expands this complaint about custom to include science itself. Indeed, his final complaint here—“it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain” (171)—is particularly notable, for it raises questions about the boundaries of knowledge in the Victorian period (or any period, for that matter). As a means of organizing knowledge—and in that sense, determining what constitutes “knowledge” or “worth knowing” at all—science attempts to “explain all” by subjecting all possible knowledge to testable, verifiable explanations of phenomena. Thus, phenomena that cannot be explained in this scientific way lie somewhere outside the bounds of that which is knowable or
worth knowing. In this sense, *Dracula* challenges such scientific notions of testability, both thematically in terms of Van Helsing’s complaints about science and structurally in the ways that the novel’s distributed narration enacts the problems associated with knowledge in an age of proliferating information.

Stoker’s homage to the distributed narration in the *Woman in White* functions as far more than a structural innovation; it is a comment on Victorian anxieties about organizing information, which are themselves anxieties about accessing information. As Mina assembles the documents and listens to Seward’s diary record of Lucy’s death, she finds that her “brain was all in a whirl” (198) and remarks that “it is all so wild, and mysterious, and strange that if I had not known Jonathan’s experience in Transylvania I could not have believed. As it was, I didn’t know what to believe . . .” (198). Mina’s response to the diary echoes the novel’s epigraph, with its concerns that this “history” is “almost at variance with the possibilities of latter-day belief” (5). What Mina is being asked to believe—that Dracula is a vampire; that Lucy has been transformed into the monstrous mother of the Bloofer Lady; that this narrative is all part of a larger plan on the part of Dracula—is potentially “at variance with the possibilities of latter-day belief” (5). Mina’s use of the word “wild” to describe the story thus far is fitting, since it denotes that which lies outside the bounds of acceptable categorization. Mina’s response to this problem is codification.

Her initial impulse is to create a timeline: “Let me write this all out now. . . .

In this matter dates are everything, and I think that if we get all our material ready,

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11 This claim is obviously designed to distinguish the novel from a work of fiction.
and have every item put in chronological order, we shall have done much” (198). Her
decision to organize the information chronologically suggests that she intends to
organize this collection of facts into some narrative. As Richards explains, Mina
believes that exerting control over the chronology will allow the crew to control
Dracula:

Dates, a matter of absolute fact with no room for subjectivity,
preoccupy Mina, who believes that accuracy will give them power
over Dracula. Her manuscripts, because of their content, the means of
controlling both Dracula and the anxieties, both cultural and
informational, that the novel embodies, and precisely deployed
knowledge is the only means by which the group can defeat Dracula.
Any anxiety about what they have learned is allayed by the absolute
accuracy the narratives have established for themselves. (448)

Richards’s claim that dates are “a matter of absolute fact with no room for
subjectivity” of course ignores the ways that chronology itself indicates an attempt to
make events conform to a preconceived theory. The very act of ordering by Mina and
(later) Jonathan as a chronology itself implies a sequencing of events—and that, in
turn, implies that relationships exist between the items being organized, whether or
not those relationships are imagined or real. In short, Mina’s response to the
proliferation of information, her method of apprehending the items’ relationships to
one another, is to transform it, essentially, into a work of fiction. As Jann rightly
points out, “to order is to explain—to give the ‘facts’ a voice” (281).

While to the reader of Dracula, this collation is a work of fiction, Mina
The Victorian
describes it as the collection of evidence: Seward notes that “Mrs. Harker says that they are knitting together in chronological order every scrap of evidence they have” (199). Like a Wilkie Collins detective, Mina subjects the “evidence” to the domestic process of knitting. It is an interesting metaphor, aligning this effort to make sense of a set of disparate facts with the act of piecing together parts to make a whole. But it is important to note that this whole is not naturally occurring—it is constructed; it is designed. Stoker complicates this position even further by raising questions of authenticity and authority with regard to information and its management. When Mina transcribes the various pieces of documentary evidence in her act of “knitting,” she makes copies: “. . . I began to typewrite from the beginning of the seventh cylinder. I used manifold, and so took three copies of the diary, just as I had done with all the rest” (198). Why Mina makes copies of the document is unclear; while it is possible she does so simply to make the dissemination of information easier, it is also possible that she creates the copies as a kind of insurance in case anything happens to the original documentation—which is, of course, exactly what happens.

When the crew discovers the horrifying scene of Dracula’s forcing Mina to drink his blood, they find that he has done more than force Mina to drink his blood; they find that he has burned the original copies of their evidence:

“All the manuscript had been burned, and the blue flames were flickering amongst the white ashes; the cylinders of your phonograph too were thrown on the fire, and the wax had helped the flames.” Here I interrupted. “Thank God there is the other copy in the safe!” (249)

The burning of the manuscript here raises a series of concerns about evidence and
authenticity. As I have argued, one of the primary motives the crew has for assembling their documentary evidence is so that it might serve as evidence in the case of an inquest. But without that “authentic” or “original” material, the remaining text functions itself as a kind of fiction—and a paranoid one, at that.

The burning of the manuscript also evokes other anxieties about coping with the proliferation of information in the late 19th century. As I noted earlier, Mina’s response to the disparate nature of the evidence that the crew has collected—the way that she chooses to organize it in order to ease its comprehension—is to render it a chronology. Until the end—with Jonathan’s remark that “in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing . . .” (326)—there seems to be no anxiety about the problems associated with recording information. As Richards notes, this notion that the “mechanically mass-produced and reproduced pages . . . lack the authority of the original, often handwritten, accounts” (442) contrasts with the claims in the epigraph about the authenticity of the narrative that follows, when Harker had asserted that despite their un-originality, their having been placed in order somehow bestows authenticity upon them.

This situation is, of course, the irony of the late Victorian world. The proliferation of information necessitates its recording by increasingly mechanical means, but recording information means copying, which in turn means that its authority is somehow diminished. Instead of a collection of facts and evidence, we are left with what is merely a “mass of material” in the form of a “mass of type writing.” The novel exposes this anxiety most clearly in Dracula’s destruction of the
The Victorian crew’s original manuscripts:

He had been there, and though it could only have been for a few seconds, he made rare hay of the place. All the manuscript had been burned, and the blue flames were flickering amongst the white ashes; the cylinders of your phonograph too were thrown on the fire, and the wax had helped the flames.” (chapter 21)

Here we see simultaneously an anxiety over the need to record information at all, since the act of amassing a written record means that Dracula can destroy that record in a way that renders it completely unrecoverable. Complicating matters even more, the technology used to create that record expedites the destruction of the very record it facilitates. Thus, the technology that both facilitates the proliferation of information—and which thus enables the proliferation of information that necessitates recording in the first place—is itself a threat to the very record it makes possible. All that remains, in the end, is the copy of the “authentic” record of the events surrounding the efforts to stop Dracula. There are, in the end, no “facts” to support any claims that the Crew might make. The remaining “record”—such as it is, a loose pile of copies of documents, newspaper entries, and receipts—chronicles both the attempts to navigate a world in which traditional categories have broken down and where even the technology that should ostensibly help them negotiate this modern world becomes both tool and curse.

*Dracula* is an attempt to explain an event that was experienced in different ways by different individuals and groups, and the only evidence for this event exists in the form of diaries, letters, phonograph recordings, bills, receipts, ships logs, and
newspaper cuttings. In other words, *Dracula* is an attempt to explain *what just happened*. It is an attempt to pin down what our protagonists know and what they can know. But as Jonathan Harker admits at the end of the novel, even the evidence is suspect. Thus, while *Dracula* is rightly read as an expression of Victorian racism or anxieties about sexuality, it should also be read as a part of that pantheon of novels that articulates an epistemic crisis at the end of the period.

**Works Cited**


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