

Bernadette Murphy

Midterm Essay

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Dracula Deconstruction Article Review

In “Doubling and Repetition: Realism and Closure in Dracula,” John Paul Riquelme discusses the novel Dracula, by Bram Stoker, through a Deconstructive theoretical lens. As the title may suggest, the article focuses heavily on “doublings throughout the novel. In essence, this is the idea of Deconstruction. Deconstructive Criticism focuses not simply on the physical words on the page, but it also does not focus on the most obvious meaning of the words. Rather, the theory aims to find the faults in the worlds on the page, and turn whatever work in on itself. In deconstructing a work, or taking it apart, a reader will very soon see that “language does not operate in the tidy fashion we like to think it does” (Tyson 241). In other words, the theory aims to find all of the discrepancies and miscommunications that may occur in a piece of literature and put them on display to convey an entirely different and often unintended message to the audience. Interestingly enough, as a new deconstructuralist idea may come out about a certain piece of work, another author can just as easily deconstruct that. This highlights one of the main points of the theory: language is ultimately “undecidable” (Tyson 245). Deconstruction often aims to focus on a set of cultural binaries where there is always going to be something to be considered privileged over the other. In focusing on these binaries, commonalities in pieces of literature become

more and more common. Focusing on Dracula specifically, the author of the deconstruction article in question, John Paul Riquelme, seems to hone in on the blurred descriptions of the binaries of human/monster as well as good/evil. Riquelme focuses on “doublings” in the novel (559). He claims that these doublings “undermine the differences” in the novel because the very differences that Stoker are trying to invoke onto his characters are “putative” and show that these “supposedly contrasting groups” are actually quite similar (559). As a deconstruction essay, Riquelme here is trying to counteract the very thing the text might be trying to say. As Stoker may have aimed for the social hierarchy in his novel to be quite clear, Riquelme uses the text itself to show that the social status of the characters is unclear.

As previously mentioned, Riquelme aims to show that doublings or Stoker’s characters are not very clean cut. While on the surface the character of Dracula may be considered an evil monster, a deconstructive reading of the text might show that not only is the evilness in his character not completely obvious, but what defines evil can also become an issue within the novel. The doubling of good and evil is an interesting topic to explore as it can be interesting to interpret what makes any of Stoker’s other characters “evil.” Towards the beginning of the essay, Riquelme refers to Jonathan Harker as “both Dracula’s instrument and his double.” After spending the time in the castle with Dracula, Harker then finds himself in a “subservient” relationship with not only Dracula but also still his employer, Mr. Hawkins. In attempting to focus on business ventures and also being completely at the mercy of Dracula, Harker now finds himself in the middle of two unethical worlds. He then not only loses his own “human agency” but

is also forced to give up control of his wife, which ultimately, is a very emasculating moment in his life. He is responsible for the needs of Dracula as well as the over encompassing needs of his employer, and what is moral and right is no longer clear. In terms of Harker being considered Dracula's "double," Riquelme references the novel in explaining that Dracula's family history consisted heavily of men fighting for the "freedom of choice." He points out that, interestingly enough, as a vampire, the power to choose much of anything has become extremely limited. Similar to Dracula, Harker has also lost his freedom of choice in the business world as well as his current personal world (Riquelme 561). While these worlds may seem inherently different, the basic decisions that govern their everyday lives are extremely similar. Later in the novel, as Riquelme points out, as the characters hunt for vampires, they assume this task as their duty and their responsibility, as opposed to understanding it as their own personal choice. Just as a vampire would "fight to protect their home and values," the vampire hunters aim to do the same thing. Although they may seem to come from two completely different worlds, the motivations behind their decisions are very similar. While not explicitly stated, the theory of psychoanalytic criticism also comes into play within the article. With the discussion of the power to choose and the loss of such, the psychoanalytic effects on the characters is an interesting point to be discussed. In what way does Dracula's inability to control himself cause him to be more evil? To what extent does Harker's loss of power affect his decision making skills? Even if Dracula may seem like he has the upper hand on Harker in the beginning, he is still considered to not have choices in his overall actions, thus limiting his overall power. Additionally,

the doubling of morality comes into play when the novel touches on various religious aspects. As an “identified” protestant, Harker comes into contact with a woman who places a crucifix rosary in his possession in order to warn him about his travels. While ignoring it at first, he later wears it around his neck. In one instance, this even ends up saving him when he cuts his face while shaving. In a traditional setting, a devout protestant man would not be seen with a catholic rosary draped around his neck. However, in the novel, they not only “accept the use of the objects” for their superstitious purposes, they even “proceed under a catholic leader” (Riquelme 564). What is normally such a clear distinction, the lines of religion and loyalty come very seriously into question.

In terms of the argument’s significance, apart from the focus on the doublings of the characters, the discussion of the narration bodes for an interesting subpoint. As the reliability of the narration is often discussed, Riquelme states that this issue is “bottomless.” He explains that as Mina is “the subject and the object,” she is the person the story is about, and she is also the one that is making the narrative available to the reader. Difficulties arise in interpreting this due to the reliability of her reasoning. As she is “transcribing” the incident after it has occurred, she is able to let her current emotions overtake the incident that has occurred in the past, and thus the story may be skewed in all aspects (Riquelme 569-570). Additionally, an extended discussion could be had on Riquelme’s point of the conglomeration of characters that end up in Mina’s child. He explains that the various bloods that have been exchanged throughout this baby suggest that there is a “form of Dracula” moving on in the world “in a living form” (572).

This lack of finality shows one overarching double: life and death simply do not mean much for what lives on after something has ended. As there were many things left a bit unclear in terms of the various characters and their actions and decisions, the lack of finality explains a good bit about the novel.

Works Cited

- Riquelme, John Paul. "Doubling and Repetition/Realism and Closure in *Dracula*." *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: Bram Stoker, Dracula*. John Riquelme ed. New York: Bedford, 2002. 559-572.
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