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ENG 333- Intro to Critical Theory

### Article Review

John Paul Riquelme uses the deconstruction theory of criticism in order to explain Dracula. To understand it, one must first know what deconstruction is. According to Lois Tyson, deconstructive criticism there are two main purposes in deconstructing a literary text, “(1) to reveal the text’s undecidability and/or (2) to reveal the complex operations and limitations of the ideologies of which the text is constructed” (245). The first purpose is often misconstrued by both students and faculty. Many may assume that undecidability is the reader’s inability to choose from a multitude of interpretations, however this is incorrect. Tyson states, “specific meanings are just “moments” of meaning that give way, inevitably, to more meanings” (245). Therefore, is meant to show that there are indefinite and conflicting possible meanings within one text. There is no true meaning, in the conventional sense of the word. The second purpose of deconstruction displays ideologies to a reader, either from which the text is constructed or how current ideologies influence how the reader views the world. Tyson explains, “a deconstructive critic looks for meanings in the text that conflict with its main theme, focusing on self-contradictions of which the text seems unaware” (246).

Riquelme’s thesis within his article is that “the doublings in Dracula tend to undermine the punitive differences that help maintain social hierarchies because those doublings frequently suggest the supposedly contrasting groups and individuals resemble each other” (560). Riquelme’s claim is informed by deconstructive criticism because he focuses on the undecidability and the self-contradictions within the text to pull meaning from. He specifically

uses binaries, identities, limitations of ideologies (social hierarchy), instabilities and uncertainties to support his claim. Riquelme also expresses that the text “makes one question the bases on which we think of our world and ourselves as well-ordered, sane, and safe” (560). His deconstruction of Dracula in the article provides examples to support his thesis.

Riquelme specifies that he will reveal the continuous contrasts and connections between a few characters: Harker and Dracula, Dr. Seward and Renfield, and Mina and Dracula (561). To start off, in the article and the book, Jonathan Harker and Dracula are introduced and the first pair to be linked. To the untrained eye, these two characters show an explicit binary- human and non-human, or human and monster. Riquelme asserts that Harker is actually Dracula’s “instrument and his double” (561). Due to this relationship, Harker is the bridge between the human and supernatural worlds. The first instance of parallel between Harker and Dracula is when Dracula discusses the history of his family. Dracula paints the picture of “freedom fighters” (in Riquelme’s words) and claims to have fought for freedom of choice. This is ironic because Harker realizes he is essentially a prisoner in Dracula’s castle and has lost his freedom of choice. The first instance of resemblance between the two characters is when Harker decides to scale the castle wall to reach Dracula’s room. This is after he has witnessed Dracula climb down the wall lizard-like several times. After the first time Harker sees Dracula climb like this, he asks himself, “What manner of man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of a man?” Riquelme uses this instance to address not only resemblance but also the conventional hierarchy of understanding that which has been violated when the superhuman turns out to resemble something less than human (562). Harker and the readers are made aware of the supernatural and the fact that though something may look human, it may actually not be

human at all. The privileged term in the binary is human, yet these characters become a paradox. Therefore, not only is humanity made questionable but also the sanity of human minds.

The next pair within the story that is linked is Dr. Seward and his patient Renfield. Riquelme identifies their differences in binaries: mad versus sane and patient versus doctor (566). Despite these obvious differences, the two begin to mirror each other and the reader begins to question which character is indeed sane. Dr. Seward is assumed to be a psychologist, with a certified expertise in sanity, yet in his transcriptions he is concerned about his mental stability after his denied proposal to Lucy. Riquelme reminds readers about how Renfield keeps detailed accounts of his pets and points out the similarity of it to how Dr. Seward keeps detailed accounts of his patients; specifically Renfield (567). Next, Riquelme introduces the idea of consumption. Renfield is obsessed with the food chain or hierarchy of living things, beginning with insects, to animals, to humans, and often tries to absorb as many lives as possible (567). In contrast, Dr. Seward is more interested in intellectual absorption. His intellectual appetite results him in considering the sacrifice of human beings as a mean to reach his goal (567-568). Again, this causes readers to question humanity and sanity.

The last pair mentioned is Mina and Dracula. Through an embrace which involved Mina drinking blood from Dracula's breast, she gained the ability to have telepathic contact with him. Dr. Seward equates this interaction to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink. Riquelme discusses the "crossing of several boundaries" and the idea that "animal and human, male and female, child and adult, perverse sexuality, and breastfeeding have simultaneously exchanged places, as if they were interchangeable rather than different and distinct" (570). This moment challenges identity and contradicts the differences of the binaries

mentioned. Due to the exchange of blood between Mina and Dracula, Mina gains a supernatural ability and can communicate with Dracula telepathically. This ability builds a bridge between the humans and vampire. Mina has a child and the reader is left questioning the humanity of the child because it is a mixture of human and vampire blood. Riquelme ends the article with a question posed by Harker before, “what manner of man is this?” (572).

In addition to deconstructive criticism, this article includes possibilities for psychoanalytic criticism. The binary of sanity and insanity ties in with psychoanalysis because it deals with the brain. A reader could psychoanalyze Jonathan Harker in the castle, once he is found at the mental hospital, and his neglect to mention Dracula’s blood in his and Mina’s child. Dr. Seward and Renfield are prime candidates for psychoanalysis as mentioned earlier. Mina could also be psychoanalyzed for what drives her desires for Dracula. A psychoanalysis of this book would be what drives any of the main characters or what are the underlying sexual connotations.

Riquelme stated that “doublings and repetitions blur boundaries that inform the principles we associate with sanity and that regulate the limits and distinctions of our social world” (559). This statement can be agreed with and confirmed through the examples given above. Throughout the book doublings cause readers to question their ideologies and the structural bias they may have brought with them into reading. However, his actual thesis, that “the doublings in Dracula tend to undermine the punitive differences that help maintain social hierarchies because those doublings frequently suggest the supposedly contrasting groups and individuals resemble each other,” is not as convincing. Riquelme doesn’t quite organize his article in a way that makes a reader remember what his argument is. The article jumps from one idea to another, some which

can be traced back to the thesis, while others fall flat. He mentions the contrasting connections between characters and lists them (Harker and Dracula, Dr. Seward and Renfield, Mina and Lucy, Van Helsing and Dracula, and Mina and Dracula), so one would assume that each of these pairs would be mentioned and explained. This was not found to be so. A reader must read through the article and then search for certain sections for certain information. Also, there was little mention of groups, which would have been a good contrast- vampire hunters versus vampires, although it could be humans versus vampires. In addition, social hierarchies which seemed to be a focal point of the thesis were only glazed over. There was an expectation that the end of the article would wrap up the ideas and reiterate the thesis. The author chose to end with the blood identity of the Harker child and ambiguity of an end or a beginning.

### Works Cited

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