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The Paradox of Knowing More: When More Information Doesn't Always Mean Power



Figure 1 - Mephistopheles and Margaretta (Sailko 2019)

The paradox of information lies in the notion that knowing more does not always grant clarity or power. In *Dracula* (1897), Bram Stoker employs the epistolary format, using a web of narrators whose fragmented and subjective accounts create an illusion of reliability while concealing deeper truths. Each narrator, whether through fear, moral obligation, or clinical detachment, presents a version of events shaped by personal biases and limitations. This narrative strategy mirrors the duality embodied in the 19th-century statue *Mephistopheles and Margaretta*, which appears as one figure but reveals another perspective in a mirror. Similarly, the narrators in *Dracula* seem to provide clarity but instead, entangle the reader in obscured

realities. By exploring the narrators' unreliability and the fragmented truth they construct, this essay will analyze how Stoker's use of the epistolary format deepens the Gothic theme of epistemological uncertainty, illustrating that more information does not always mean greater understanding. As Elizabeth Miller notes in *Dracula: Sense and Nonsense* (2006), "One could argue that absence is as important as presence: that Stoker withheld information in order to make his character more mysterious; or that Dracula's own silence about his past is a consequence of the fact that Stoker denies him a narrative voice of his own." (165).

The epistolary format, a compilation of journal entries, letters, telegrams, and memorandums creates the illusion of transparency and objectivity. While providing multiple perspectives, this structure inherently limits understanding, as each narrator's account reflects subjective biases shaped by emotion, culture, and personal context. As Van Helsing tells his assembled crew of would-be vampire hunters:

> I know it was hard for you to quite trust me then, for to trust such violence needs to understand, and I take it that you do not, that you cannot, trust me now, for you do not yet understand. And there may be more times when I shall want you to trust when you cannot, and may not, and must not yet understand. But the time will come when your trust shall be whole and complete in me, and when you shall understand as though the sunlight himself shone through (Stoker 184).

Although this format appears to construct a cohesive narrative, it leaves interpretative gaps, forcing the reader to speculate and contributing to the ambiguity central to Gothic literature. The duality of the epistolary format mirrors the visual metaphor of the statue. Initially,

the statue depicts Mephistopheles, but its mirrored reflection reveals Margaretta, reframing perception. Similarly, in *Dracula*, each narrator's account seems to add perspectives that obscure as much as they reveal. This duality complicates understanding, emphasizing the Gothic fascination between appearance and hidden realities. This approach highlights one of the central themes of Gothic literature: the unreliability of perception and the limits of human understanding. By presenting fragmented and often contradictory accounts, Stoker invites the reader to question the narrators' credibility, reinforcing the notion that knowing more does not always lead to enlightenment. Instead, the epistolary format becomes a narrative tool for deception, deepening the mystery and unease that define the Gothic tradition. According to William Hughes' *Historical Dictionary of Gothic Literature* (2013), the assumed editor managing the epistolary format in Gothic literature:

> Reassures the reader regarding quality as well as credibility, presents the relevant content in an organized and accessible manner, and guides him or her toward the logical conclusion dictated by the evidence…. Despite this apparent association with narrative stability and credibility of subject matter, the fictional editor is frequently, however, an unreliable figure in Gothic fiction (94-95).

Jonathan Harker's journal entries capture his fear and confusion, clouded by his limited understanding of the supernatural. For example, his encounters with the people of Eastern Europe are full of prejudice and bias. He is the modern man and these peasants with their superstitions are "All very ridiculous but I did not feel comfortable. However, there was business to be done, and I could allow nothing to interfere with it" (Stoker 12). His encounters with

Dracula's brides and growing suspicions about Dracula are shaped by his emotional turmoil. As Carol A. Senf notes in *Dracula: The Unseen Face in the Mirror* (1979):

> The fact that vampires cast no reflection is part of the iconography of vampires in East European folklore, but Stoker translates the superstitious belief that creatures without souls have no reflection into a metaphor, which he can illustrate his characters' lack of moral vision. Harker's inability to 'see' Dracula is a manifestation of moral blindness which reveals his insensitivity to others and (as will become evident later) his inability to perceive certain traits within himself (164).

The fragmented, speculative nature of Harker's narrative forces readers to fill gaps, heightening unease and distrust in his account. It is through Harker's subjective perspective, which distorts reality, we can relate its effect on the shift in perception between Mephistopheles and Margaretta.

Mina Harker's careful compilation of letters, telegrams are accounts that reflect her moral and societal ideals, aligning her narrative with Victorian expectations of purity and devotion. She primarily writes to her fiancé Jonathan and close friend Lucy, both of whom are people she needs to present a certain personality towards. Mina's framing imposes her biases on the narrative, shaping how events are understood and potentially omitting inconvenient truths. Like the hidden figure of Margaretta, Mina's reliability is veiled beneath her role as a compiler and moral figure.

Dr. John Seward's rational and clinical tone prioritizes logical explanations over supernatural insights. His observations of Lucy Westenra and Renfield downplay Dracula's mystical threat. Seward's rationality provides a false sense of clarity, obscuring the supernatural horror at the story's core. He wishes only to "Advance [his] own branch of science to a pitch compared with which Burdon-Sanderson's physiology or Ferrier's brain knowledge would be as nothing" (Stoker 79). He refuses to consider a supernatural explanation for Renfield's actions until it is too late. Together, these narrators create a fragmented and unreliable narrative tapestry. Each narrator offers valuable insight but possibly obscuring the truth, reflecting the duality of human perception, cultural influences and duality, aligning with the Gothic themes of ambiguity and emotional nuance.

The fragmented narration is symbolic of the Gothic tradition's focus on the tension between appearance and reality. The overlapping yet incomplete perspectives of the narrators mirror the Gothic fascination with obscured truths, fostering mystery and psychological dissonance. The paradox of knowledge in Dracula is in the abundance of information given to us about Dracula by everyone but the name-sake himself. The multiplicity leads to obscurity, with each new perspective complicating rather than clarifying the truth. The fragmented narrative reflects the Gothic critique of knowledge, where more information deepens confusion. As Jennifer Renner Del Nero tells us in *Embracing the Other in Gothic Texts: Cultivating Understanding in the Reading Classroom* (2018), "Essentially, the Gothic genre involves exploring the societal other or thing existing on the borderlands that both fascinates and horrifies; although this other is initially repressed, it ultimately manifests in some mode that alters the text's reality and truth" (392). The structure forces readers to actively engage with and reconcile conflicting accounts, drawing them into the narrative's ambiguity. The fragmented structure

critiques the Enlightenment-era faith in rationality, suggesting that truth is inherently multifaceted and subjective. By presenting narrators who fail to fully comprehend the supernatural, Stoker emphasizes the limits of reason and perception.

The *Mephistopheles and Margaretta* statue serves as a compelling metaphor for the fragmented narrative structure of *Dracula*. The duality of the statue parallels how the novel's multiple narrators offer only partial truths. Just as the statue challenges the observer to question their initial perception, *Dracula* challenges the reader to reconcile the narrators' conflicting accounts and recognize the hidden truths lurking beneath their words. Like the viewer of the statue, readers of *Dracula* may initially believe that more perspectives provide greater clarity. However, the revelations from each narrator often complicate rather than simplify the narrative, much like the hidden figure in the statue shifts the focus and alters the interpretation of the scene. The statue serves as a powerful symbol of duality and hidden truths, mirroring the narrative complexities of Dracula. Mephistopheles, the demon from *Faust, Part One* (Goethe 1808), embodies deception, forbidden knowledge, and moral corruption, tempting Dr. Faustus with promises of power at the cost of his soul. Margaretta, by contrast, represents humility, innocence, and tragic sacrifice, often portrayed as the virtuous figure destroyed by the consequences of Faust's pact. This optical illusion challenges the observer to reconcile two seemingly opposing identities, forcing a deeper examination of perception and reality.

In *Dracula*, this interplay between seen and unseen truths are reflected in the narrators' limited perspectives. Jonathan Harker, Mina Harker, and Dr. Seward each present their version of events, but their biases and subjective interpretations obscure the complete truth. Like the statue's observer, the reader must actively engage with these conflicting accounts, knowing some truths will remain elusive. The statue aligns with Victorian anxieties about duality and hidden

forces, themes central to Gothic literature. It shifts focus and challenges perception, emphasizing the limits of human understanding. It shows viewers that truth is elusive and perception is inherently flawed. As a critique of the era's faith in rationality and scientific progress, Dracula, and by extension, the statue, exposes the limitations of perception, reminding viewers and readers alike that what is visible is not always the full story.

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