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Paper #1

A few of the ways in which absenting is employed in *Dracula* include Dracula’s castle being devoid of any servants, carriage drivers, and a lot of furniture, not a single bite being shown on camera, and a lack of women in roles that solve problems in the plot. The first point about the emptiness of Dracula’s castle is discussed later, but in general, these absences characterize Dracula as an imposter pretending to be a nobleman in an attempt to win favor with Renfield in the opening of the movie. There is an argument to be made that this also primitivizes Dracula, as he does not understand London’s views on noblemen enough to fit in (at least for the audience watching, since Renfield falls for it regardless) (Browning, 18:00). Next, the absence of a bite on screen can be interpreted in a couple of ways. In class, the connection was made that Dracula biting someone alludes to him sexually assaulting his victim, as his fangs are phallic objects, and the neck is an intimate part of the body for him to be “penetrating”. This would lead to an interpretation that bites were omitted because the film needed to be less sexually explicit in order to be marketable, especially with the implications of same-sex intimacy between Dracula and Renfield (Browning, 18:00). However, this view seems overly Freudian without any real justification as to why. Another, more pragmatic interpretation is that Browning did not want his movie to overly rely on physical violence in order to appeal to a wider audience, especially when considering the target audience is people from the early 1930s, where violence may not have been as accepted in film nearly as much. Finally, the lack of women in problem-solving roles is more of a relic of the time period than a dramatic statement by Browning. This was a time where the trope of a damsel in distress (Mina) needing to be saved by a courageous, strong willed, typically white hero (Van Helsing) was common across the entire film industry.

Dracula’s behavior can be interpreted to be primitivizing. A few key examples include Dracula’s single mindedness on Renfield’s papercut (Browning, 14:50), his generally poor/simple English, the way he approaches Renfield, Lucy, and Mina right before attacking (Browning, 17:50, 28:45, 37:40), and the many connections Dracula has to animals, having a castle crawling in insects and rodents, and transforming into a bat throughout the film, as well as a wolf at one point (Browning, 44:40). From top to bottom, these examples primitivize Dracula because they show he is focused on the immediate present, implying he is unable to think complexly about the future (this lines up with the larger picture of most of his attacks seeming to be spur-of-the moment events, with the longest period of planning taking a day). Dracula’s poor English also primitivizes him because it distances himself from the “proper English of the respected, educated, and wealthy Londoners”. This juxtaposition calls attention to Dracula’s lack of respect, education, and material wealth, thereby Othering him (as defined by Arata’s “The Occidental tourist: Stoker and reverse colonization” (pg. 109)) as a primitive, colonized person. Regarding Dracula’s creep towards his prey, this can be seen as an almost animalistic behavior, which, when combined with his affinity for animals, can be seen as Browning attempting to characterize Dracula as more animal than human, thus primitivizing him be invoking imagery of a hypothetical less evolved person.

This movie is full of examples of reverse colonization, but the few examples to focus on here include almost the entirety of Renfield’s character, as well as Mina’s behavior after being bitten by Dracula (Browning, 37:40). Renfield is a prime example of reverse colonization. What once was a seemingly respected, white, upper class, London-living real estate agent was swiftly transformed into an insect-craving manifestation of all the primitive aspects of Dracula’s character, and by extension, his race, thus reverse colonizing Renfield. Mina, on the other hand, is much more interesting. After being bit, Mina slowly shows more and more behaviors typical of vampires, beginning with an aversion to wolf’s bane (Browning, 1:01:33), a newfound appreciation for “nights with fog”, when “only yesterday she said she was afraid of the night” (Browning, 1:03:08), being able to communicate with Dracula as a bat (Browning, 1:03:25), and being terrified of crucifixes (Browning, 1:04:47). These changes make the idea that Dracula is reverse colonizing his victims much more explicit. By having Mina show behaviors relevant to Dracula’s race as opposed to her own white race, an argument can be made that Dracula is “erasing” Mina’s own race and replacing it with his own, thereby reverse colonizing her. In addition, a key point to mention is that after being bit, both Renfield and Mina appear to “switch sides”, with Renfield exclaiming his loyalty to Dracula throughout the movie and Mina only really listening to Dracula after being bitten, not the Londoners. Examples of this include Mina ignoring the men telling her to go to her room until Dracula tells her to (Browning, 40:55-42:30), and Mina dropping everything to (try to) do what Dracula squeaks to her as a bat (Browning, 1:03:25).

To quickly touch on the trappings of wealth and respectability absent from Dracula’s castle, attention needs to be brought to a few aspects. Namely, the abundance of insects and rodents running around (and the cobwebs!), the total lack of servants, carriage drivers, and other workers typically found in a castle, a general lack of furnishings (and even some railings missing!), and the only light sources being moonlight, a fireplace, and a few candles. All of these are examples of things that no one should find in a castle owned and operated by someone wealthy enough to own a castle. This can be interpreted to mean a couple of things. Class discussions directed these observations to characterize Dracula as a colonized person. This is predicated on the connection between the stereotypically poor colonized person and Dracula’s seemingly lack of material wealth incriminating him as a colonized person. Another interpretation could be that (as mentioned earlier), Dracula is attempting to use the castle as a means to establish credibility with Renfield as a nobleman but is not in tune enough or did not prepare enough to really sell it to the audience. This generates a sort of uneasiness in the viewer that knows something is wrong, but either is not able to identify it or does not know where to begin identifying it.

On the topic of the women’s lack of agency in the film, there are 3 instances worth looking at. First, there are Dracula’s three wives, who are only on screen from 5:51 to 6:18 (Browning), where they get out of their coffins, wander for a bit, and say nothing. Again from 16:45-17:45 (Browning), where they appear in a doorway, wearing long, flowy wedding dresses, arms clutched to their chest as they slowly creep towards Renfield. As Renfield opens a door, the wives stare at him from behind with a look akin to a starving animal about to hunt. Through Dracula Magic ™, Renfield collapses, and the wives begin encroaching on him. Dracula enters stage right, wards off the wives, who back away fearful of Dracula, and Dracula “feasts” on Renfield himself. The entire scene has no dialogue. This scene is relevant because this is the only thing that the wives do in the entire film. These women’s only role in the movie was to be told “no, you cannot do what you want to do” by Dracula. This is a pretty obvious example of how the wives have no agency in the film, as they bend to whatever the man in their life wants them to do, as opposed to what they want to do. Secondly, there is Lucy. Similarly, Lucy has a very limited role in the movie. She never really does anything to further her own agenda. She’s at the opera to socialize with her friend Mina, then she gets bitten in the night, dying to extreme blood loss (Browning, 29:30). She ends up being resurrected as a vampire and kills a few kids (Browning, 49:25), and then disappears for the rest of the film. The only real action Lucy takes in the movie is killing kids, and the only reason she did was because of Dracula vampirizing her and making her want to, as opposed to her doing it of her own volition. This is another example of women’s lack of agency in the film. Finally, there is Mina, who never gets the chance to do what she wants in the film. Of particular interest is the scene from 42:00-42:50 (Browning). The focus of this scene is primarily on the discovery of Dracula not casting a reflection, which will be discussed later. However, by focusing on Mina’s responses here, one can continue to make an argument that women in this film do not have agency. The scene opens with suit-wearing Dracula towering over a dress and scarf wearing Mina, who is sitting on a couch looking quite energetic and cheerful. Mina’s father shows up and tries to convince her to go to her room for the night, “as professor Van Helsing suggests” (Browning, 42:10). Mina counters by standing up, saying that she’s “feeling quite well” (Browning, 42:16). Then, Dracula tells Mina to listen to her father, garnering the response “very well, goodnight” (Browning, 42:26). This shows that Mina has no agency because she must listen to a man about matters as trivial as bedtime, even when she does not want to go to bed and claims that she is well enough to stay up.

To contextualize these women in terms of the gender double bind, the wives are very clearly on the demon side of the split, as their only action in the movie is trying to “eat” Renfield (especially under a Freudian interpretation). Mina highlights the angel side of the split, being seen as a defensive, often clueless love interest who cannot defend herself without the help of a big, strong, white man. Lucy highlights a transformation from angel to demon, going from a character like Mina to this monster that eats children. The important thing to note here is that the transformation is instant, with no tangible transition between the two states. This reinforces the idea of the gender double bind in which women are exclusively seen as one of the two sides of the split.

In general, Dracula is not a very violent movie, at least graphically. There are no visual examples of people being bitten on screen, with most victims having the camera cut away from them at the last second (Renfield at 17:55 (Browning), the flower girl at 22:00 (Browning), Lucy at 29:00 (Browning), and Mina at 37:50 (Browning)). In addition, the crew of the boat that Dracula rides to London is all killed, but the most the audience sees is a silhouette of the captain tied to the wheel (Browning, 20:22), Renfield attacks a nurse at 48:45 (Browning), which is omitted, and Van Helsing is never seen actually driving the stake through Dracula’s heart (Browning, 1:12:55). In the case of all the bite related incidents (that is to say, not the ship or the stake incidents), all of the cuts away can be interpreted as a representation of the dangers of miscegenation. Miscegenation is the mixing of races through sexual acts. Using the argument earlier that Dracula (and by extension the vampirized Renfield and Lucy) are sexually assaulting their victims (and the implied argument that vampirizing someone is equivalent to deracinating them) (Arata, 116), one can argue that the cut aways are not to protect the viewers from physical violence, but from the unspeakable horror of mixing races by implying sexual relations between an interracial (and sometimes gay! Horrifying!) couple.

Finally, Dracula not showing up in the mirror continues to imply that Dracula is a colonized Other. In class, lecture argued that appearing individually in photographs (and by extension, mirrors) puts one in a position of power because they can afford to be photographed or because someone wants to look at them bad enough that they will take a photograph of them. Although this runs counter to everything taught about the male gaze, following this logic would imply that Dracula, reflectionless as he is, is characterized as poor and unimportant and “unworthy of being captured”. The reflectionless Dracula juxtaposed against the other reflective characters at 42:00 (Browning) exacerbates this point by contrasting Dracula to the wealthy, educated, arguably important people in the room. These differences highlight the Otherness of Dracula in the light of being colonized.

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The absences this paper addresses in Dracula are an absence of servants and carriage drivers in Dracula’s castle, an absence of bites on screen, and an absence of women in positions that solve problems presented in the plot. The absence of servants in the castle can be seen to suggest that colonized people (i.e. Dracula) are too poor to afford them, or that they are undeserving of them to begin with. The absence of bites can be taken two ways. The Freudian view would seem to suggest that miscegenation is an atrocity unfit to be seen by the naked eye. A more pragmatic view could be seen to reflect the values of the audience of the 1930s. Namely, that they were very conservative with their tolerance of violence in film. Finally, the absence of women in problem-solving roles can be seen to suggest that women are incapable of handling things on their own and need the help of a big strong white guy to get anything done.

References

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