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How Narrative Strategies Disrupt Gender Norms in *The Woman in White* and *Dracula*

The *Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker are nineteenth century Gothic novels that were marketed as sensational novels at the time of their release. These literary works offer different interpretations of the epistolary genre and the concept of an unreliable narrator. Epistolary novels are generally "told through the medium of letters written by one or more of the characters" (Britannica). However, both novels provide their readers with the fresh interpretation of the genre by adding new or unusual means of narration. As literary devices, unreliable narrators are "features of literary works written in the first person, and they are defined by their lack of credibility regarding plot events depicted in the narrative" (Greene). This unreliability is not always immediately apparent. The unreliable narrator device is used for different reasons such as reflection on the imperfection of human memory or personal biases. Another function of the device is plot development, for example, creating a mystery for the readers to resolve. *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker are strong examples of using the unreliable narrator device successfully by employing epistolary technique through multiple narrators and means of narration while simultaneously confirming and confronting traditional gender roles.

In *The Woman in White,* Wilkie Collins uses multiple narrators and means of narration to provide different perspectives on the novel's mystery. Considered a prototype of a detective novel by many researchers, *The Woman in White* has fragmented structure which mimics piecing together testimonies of witnesses in an investigation, and the readers are invited to participate in the process of unraveling the mystery. The novel opens with a preamble in which Walter Hartright introduces himself as a narrator and warns the readers that the story is written by "more than one pen":

> When the writer of these introductory lines (Walter Hartright, by name) happens to be more closely connected than others with the incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person. When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of the narrator; and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it off, by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge, just as clearly and positively as he has spoken before them (Collins 49–50).

After the preamble, the readers are presented with Walter Hartright's narrative, followed by the story of Vincent Gilmore, solicitor, and then Marian Halcombe's diary. Next follow the written account of the events by Frederick Fairlie, esquire, Eliza Michelson, housekeeper at Blackwater Park, Hester Pinhorn, Count Fosco's cook, a doctor called Alfred Goodricke, Jane Gould, who prepared the body, and the tombstone engraving before Walter takes over the rest of the story with the exception of Mrs. Catherick's letter and Count Fosco's confession. Although the narrative structure of *The Woman in White* was considered unique by the author, many contemporary critics saw it as another example of the epistolary method (Bachman 16–17). However, the narrative does not consist of letters or diary entries only, but many pieces of written

testimony collected by Walter Hartright. One can also admit that the difference between a typical epistolary novel and *The Woman in White* is the presence of suspense and mystery in the latter. Collins is said to be inspired by the court proceedings and to view the structure of the novel as an experiment (16–17). The connections between the pieces of the information are hidden from the readers in most of the novel; the readers have to trust that Walter has his reasons for withholding the truth. This narrative flow is accepted by the readers as a part of a sensational novel (Perkins 394). As a result, Water Hartright gets away with being untruthful with his readers and other characters alike.

The unreliability of the narrators in *The Woman in White* is not obvious from the beginning. Walter Hartright is setting himself up as a noble man protecting a woman's honor. His narrative voice sounds truthful and earnest. Even his name suggests that the readers are to trust him. However, the readers later learn that the narrative is summarized and edited by Walter even when told by somebody else, so the objectivity of the narration is questionable. Walter's claim that his objective is to establish Laura's identity is also contradicted by the fact that he admits using fake names in his story (393). This revelation is significant as it proves Walter's motives go beyond re-establishing Laura's identity. Walter is keen to protect the social order that leaves him with a wife and a house at the end of the novel (393). Interestingly, despite the protagonist benefiting from the social order, the story is built as a criticism of the society and as if in support of women's rights. Walter could be said to participate in virtue signaling while not refusing the benefits of the world order.

Walter's duplicitousness is evident in other cases. Walter decides not to disclose Sir Percival's false identity and the reasons he was in the vestry. Hartright justifies this choice by

disclosing that the rightful heir is to receive his title and the house anyway. However, it is clear that Walter does not see it worth his time to prove the forgery in the marriage registry when he does not have all the proof he wants and, most importantly, gains no benefit from doing the right thing, but only a delay when he is in a rush to return to London. Another example is the conclusion of the story, when Walter leads an assembly in Limmeridge house to reestablish Laura's identity. The way Walter structures his speech takes the focus away from how these testimonies were obtained (MacDonagh 279). In a manner of a villain, Walter obtained these documents often by using threats, pressure, and blackmail. Walter Hartright, therefore, takes on a role of a vigilante, and, at least by the conclusion of the novel, cannot be trusted by an attentive reader.

On the other hand, Walter's unreliability could be partially explained by more innocent reasons. Walter's love for Laura causes him to put her on a pedestal and consider her to be of an ethereal nature. This description of Laura's character could be the result of Walter's infatuation rather than her real character. Similarly, Walter's depiction of Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco lacks nuance and turns them into caricature villains. The accounts of other characters show the complexity of the novel's central villains: Count Fosco is shown to have a soft spot for Marian which makes him change his mind about readmitting Laura to the asylum, while Sir Percival is revealed as a victim of the societal laws that left his parents without a legal way to protect him. These details provide the readers with a more realistic depiction of the villains' characters making the reading public able to sympathise with them.

When Marian Halcombe takes the stage as a narrator, the readers are not sure if they are given the true account of her journal. By her own admission, Marian reads certain parts out to

Walter as he takes notes. One does not know how detailed or how edited those notes are and if Marian later submits her journal in full to contribute to the written version of the story (Perkins 397). These circumstances make Marian an unreliable narrator with no fault of her own. Gaylin comments that women do not have narrative opportunities equal to men (305). Despite Marian and Walter contributing equally to the resolution of the mystery, Walter is the one controlling the narrative. In addition to controlling Marian's voice, Walter controls her physically: Marian and Laura are locked in the house with instructions not to leave it. These circumstances painfully resemble the conditions of the women trapped in Blackwater Park by Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco. Far from being a story about good triumphing over evil, this is a story about men silencing women: Sir Percival and Count Fosco take control over Laura and Anne Catherick's lives the way Walter takes over Marian's agency (Gaylin 306). Both "good" and "evil" men in the story consider their interests and opinions superior to any woman's.

Interestingly, *Dracula's* narrative structure is comparable with *The Woman in White* in using epistolary methods. *Dracula* pushes the boundaries of the standard epistolary narrative form by including different means of communication as well as other types of texts to form the narrative. *Dracula* combines journal and diary entries, letters, telegrams, phonograph recordings, ship logs, and newspaper articles to tell a story full of suspense. Moreover, *Dracula* uses the voices of multiple narrators whose biases and unique perspectives create the feeling of mystery. These narrative strategies build up tension as the readers learn of the events almost in real time and sometimes suspect or know more information than the characters. Finally, the use of cutting-edge technology of the time places this supernatural story in a grounded and familiar setting allowing the horror elements to blend in with the familiar and comforting reality which makes the story more believable.

Dracula opens with the journal entries of the first narrator, Jonathan Harker, not dissimilar to the opening of *The Woman in White* with Walter Hartright's narrative. However, Harker's story is "denied the privileged prominence" of Hartright (Seed 64). Harker does not control the story the way Hartright does. The unreliability of the narration is suggested by the narrator himself. Jonathan starts from the position of rationality and skepticism; he explains away all peculiar events as long as he can. While Jonathan narrates his story, he questions his own sanity as he stops being able to rationalise the events happening to him. For example, after the near seduction by the "young women", Harker writes that he "could not arrive at any unquestionable result" (Stoker 65). Mina's account is mirroring Jonathan's attempt at rationalisation, and Dr. Seward questions his own sanity just like Jonathan does. Seed calls this narrative method "a principle of delay" (66). Until a certain point in the story, the readers have better grasp of the situation than the main characters as the readers have access to all journal entries, letters, and articles.

Throughout the narrative, *Dracula* contrasts conventional masculine types of knowledge, like logic and empirical observation, with feminine types, frequently linked to intuition, emotional understanding, and subjectivity. The novel emphasizes male viewpoints, but its structure – disjointed, multifaceted, and based on shared accounts – challenges the dominance of a single masculine narrative. In contrast with Walter Hartright's control of the narrative, in *The Woman in White* as the reflection of men controlling women, Jonathan Harker is replaced by his wife Mina as the central narrator for a significant part of the story in *Dracula*. Mina's role is "collecting, collating and interpreting information" (Case 221). Her talent for organizing and synthesizing the group's stories establishes Mina as the key figure of the narrative, but her input is limited by the patriarchal views of the male characters. The need to overpower the women's

narrative agency comes from women being equal or even superior in their skills compared to men (Case 225). Although Mina exhibits proficiency in contemporary technologies and techniques (such as typewriting and shorthand), her contributions are frequently presented as auxiliary rather than dominant, mirroring the Victorian concept of the "angel in the house" (after a poem of the same name by Coventry Patmore about a perfect woman). By the end of *The Woman in White,* Marian Halcombe, who Walter calls "the good angel of our lives", finds herself in a position like Mina's (Collins 617). Similarly to the male characters shielding Mina from the details of the situation for her own protection in *Dracula*, Walter confines Marian and Laura to the house for their own safety; what these men actually do is control the narrative by silencing the voices of women.

When it comes to differences in the narrative structures of *Dracula* and *The Woman in White*, one can focus on the question of continuity. Stoker does not use peripheral narrators the way Collins does, which allows readers to see the pattern of events emerging well before the end of the story (Seed 67). Collins' peripheral narrators' accounts are fragmented, and the readers do not know how these pieces of evidence work together when they are presented in the story. In contrast, Stoker's side characters add significantly to the narrative and often allow the readers to acquire better understanding of the events than the protagonists possess. Walter Hartright does narrate the story from the perspective of the characters most linked to the events depicted, resulting in a personal and engaging experience. However, this method postpones the story's conclusion and maintains the overall continuity concealed until the final moment. On the other hand, the storytelling techniques in *Dracula* change throughout various phases of the novel, featuring journals, letters, and phonograph recordings from several characters as well as ship logs and newspaper articles that form a disjointed but linked narrative. This allows Stoker to create

suspense and foreshadow future events, involving readers in assembling the narrative puzzle. These structural decisions help the intrigue and tension that are fundamental to Collins' novel, while *Dracula* employs its diverse viewpoints to create a feeling of immediacy and urgency throughout.

Finally, Stoker includes the character of Abraham Van Helsing to bring the disjointed pieces of the narrative as well as the supernatural and scientific worlds together. He combines the roles of a detective, philosopher, and scientist (Seed 71). Van Helsing validates the accounts of other characters, removing the question of unreliability from their stories. Mina provides Abraham with Jonathan's journal, and simply by confirming that what Jonathan has written is true, Van Helsing gains admiration and trust from the Harkers, as they are relieved to be proclaimed sane by him. Van Helsing is also mostly responsible for winning over the most skeptical character, Dr. Seward, by using patient explanations and practical examples. In addition, during their investigation, Mina exchanges Jonathan's diary for Dr. Seward's, and Van Helsing shares Lucy's journal with the doctor, urging him to be open-minded and accept the supernatural elements of their situation. Van Helsing's role as a unifying character goes beyond simply validating the stories of others. His skill in combining the varied aspects of the narrative demonstrates his larger role as a bridge between the rational and the supernatural. He merges scientific precision with a willingness to explore the unknown, making him the perfect mediator in the battle against Dracula. In contrast with *The Woman in White,* in which the story comes together by the end, "*Dracula* narrates its own textual assembly" when, with the support of Van Helsing, Mina and Jonathan Harker type up "the whole connected narrative" (Seed 73). By engaging the readers in this process, Stoker enables them to witness the creation of the narrative continuity directly, showcasing the collaborative and dynamic nature of storytelling.

To conclude, both *The Woman in White* and *Dracula* develop and stretch the boundaries of the epistolary genre by adding modern or unusual types of narration. While the structures of both novels are fragmented in nature, mimicking collecting evidence piece by piece, *Dracula* is more successful in involving the readers in the investigative process. This result comes from the control of the narration by one character in *The Woman in White,* while *Dracula* passes the torch from one narrator to another. While presented as earnest and noble, Walter Hartright turns out to be an unreliable narrator: he allows bias and personal agenda to influence his judgment and his story. In contrast, while *Dracula's* stories by Jonathan, Lucy, and Mina seem unreliable at first sight, they turn out to be true as they are pieced together by Van Helsing and the Harkers. The skepticism the readers experience is built in *Dracula* through the account of the characters questioning their own experiences as if sympathising with the doubt any rational reader would experience. Finally, *Dracula* allows for more narrative agency of women than *The Woman in White* does. *The Woman in White* presents the story through the lenses of Walter Hartright who, while criticizing the women's position in society, contributes to and benefits from the status quo. While *Dracula's* male characters exert their authority to push Mina Harker aside, her account is presented unedited, and she is returned into the male confidence rather quickly in the narrative as her exclusion is admitted being a mistake. All in all, *The Woman in White* and *Dracula* explore and expand the limitations of the epistolary genre and the unreliable narrator device while expressing both criticism of and showing conformity with the societal gender roles.

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