

The absence of
amsterdam:
confounding
principles of
presentness in
stoker's dracu...



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The Absence of Amsterdam: Confounding Principles of Presentness in

Stoker's *Dracula* Doctor Abraham Van Helsing is an intriguing and somewhat problematic character on several levels. According to critic Martin Willis the introduction of Van Helsing represents a new understanding of disease and infection. In Victorian times it was still common for people to think of disease in terms of miasma, that disease was imparted through the inhalation of foul smelling air, so Van Helsing's understanding of the microbial origins of disease shows his understanding of the latest research (Willis 302). It is somewhat paradoxical, then, that Van Helsing repeatedly invokes the discredited pseudoscience of alchemy as the basis of his knowledge for dealing with Dracula. Van Helsing is also credited with recent research in his interaction with Renfield the asylum patient. The source of Van Helsing's arcane knowledge is obscured through these eclectic and contradictory references. Also strange about the character Van Helsing are his repeated quick trips back and forth between England and Amsterdam. This could be seen as yet another source of knowledge for the professor, or perhaps the other alleged sources of Van Helsing's power are metaphors for England's relationship with the old country. Such a postcolonial reading might be useful, especially if considered alongside the readings of Arata, but this paper will attempt to investigate a subtle linguistic relationship underlying and interrelated with geographical and historical factors. Amsterdam's place is certainly not central to the novel but acts as more of an "off-stage" to which Van Helsing conveniently escapes to allow Lucy to be fed upon.

Throughout the rest of the novel our connections to specific places are made through the compulsive tendency of the characters to write while they are in a place. Much is made of the direct textual links to information that is <https://assignbuster.com/the-absence-of-amsterdam-confounding-principles-of-presentness-in-stokers-dracula/>

gathered. In fact their obsessive-compulsive need to write is said to be the reason for the existence of the book in the first place (Elmessiri 105). It is significant and unusual, then, that the information on vampires coming from Van Helsing is not attested by written documents but through the word of Van Helsing alone. The others do, of course, provide valuable information through their own narratives, but their words are quickly disconnected from themselves and the written records of what was said become the ultimate authority. Van Helsing, on the other hand, is often seen as the present authority with a logocentric connection transcending textual record. This is, perhaps, why we do not have narrative taking place in Amsterdam, because Van Helsing needs neither a textual nor a geographically fixed reference in order to pass on knowledge; in fact, one of the most extensive pieces of writing that he does himself can be considered a failure. After Lucy had turned but before Van Helsing has told the others about it he wrote a note to Dr. Seward just in case anything should happen to Van Helsing before he has had a chance to tell the others of his findings. Van Helsing ends up surviving to relate his findings in person so the note becomes redundant and is never delivered (Stoker 181). If we are to draw any conclusions about a conception of Amsterdam from the logocentrism of Van Helsing, it is necessary to consider and compare the information passed on by the American. Interestingly, Quincey Morris is also reluctant to commit his communication to writing; even in his letters, he makes no effort to conform to a formal style of English and even lets his marked language come through in his idiosyncratic syntax and vocabulary (Stoker 62). Neither Van Helsing nor Quincey Morris conform to the textual standards held by the rest of the hunting party, but their similarities end there when it comes to

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communication style. Van Helsing is an authority because of his spoken words, but Quincey Morris's significance to the party comes with his actions. Even when he speaks he is most often referencing an experience he had in the past or an action he will do in the future. Van Helsing's reluctance to rely on the written word is related to his reverence for the past and his logocentrism, but Quincey Morris effects a similar stance based on his disdain for deliberation. A broad view of the colonial history of language can be extracted from the comparison of these characters. Van Helsing is a representative of the origins of English, it is assumed that Van Helsing speaks Dutch, and he is overheard at one point crying out in German "Got in Himel" (Stoker 118). Both languages connect Van Helsing with sister languages of English that evolved closer to their point of origin than the itinerant language of the Anglo-Saxons. The "American" language of Quincey Morris would then be a more recent migration of that same West Germanic language. The fact that Van Helsing is able to communicate with authority and without the aid of written language represents a purity to his language and culture. The English characters show great respect for this figure of their progenitors, but when it comes to the American it seems the language has been diluted too far. From a logocentric or historically linguistic perspective the utterances of Quincey Morris are doubly removed from their referent; the English removed the Teutonic purity of the act of reference through their commitment to writing, but the American, rather than returning to the double-sided spoken referent through the abandonment of inscription has confined himself to simple acts of appellation involving concrete and directly experiential events. The Old Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and American characters seem to bear out their expected linguistic

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predispositions, but it is ultimately unclear whether a value judgment is made on any one of those tendencies. We can easily imagine that the entire group would have been at a loss without the expertise of Van Helsing, but it is Quincey Morris whom we eventually credit with heroic martyrdom, and without the English the story may not have been told at all. Even Van Helsing, in all his logocentric glory, seems to be deficient in that he neglects to communicate necessary information until the last second and sometimes much later. The conflicting philosophies of language then are based in the geographical origins of the speakers. Considering the importance of land and geography to Dracula it seems necessary to also consider his related notions of language. If Dracula is to fit the previously constructed pattern based on the evolution of language we might expect that Dracula would emphasize linguistic origins and presentness of the speaker to an even greater degree than Van Helsing, but it would also not be unexpected to find that his philosophy of communication is significantly more complex since his origins are in a more distantly related language family than his interlocutors' and it is likely that his native language has evolved and devolved since the time he was mortal. Indeed, we find that presence is a very important aspect of Dracula's communication. He tolerates writing to the extent that it is necessary to conform to a new society, but he is unable to conceal his strong aversion to the symbol divorced from the speaker when he encounters the Jonathan Harker's letter written in shorthand. With Dracula, presence can even function as a significant form of communication apart from words of any kind. This kind of communication seems present between Dracula and each of his victims. Most of his attacks take place without a word being spoken and yet the victims recognize profound meaning through his very

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presence. This, more than Dracula's superhuman physical abilities, is what gives the impression of a metaphysical monster. It is possible, then, that the correspondences and doubling between the various characters of Dracula has less to do with the various problematic postcolonial readings of the novel and conforms more closely to subtle notions of presentness with the characters all working within a different point on a single continuum. Such a reading is necessarily confounded both by the psychological inclinations of the speaker and the reader and the medium of communication bridging the gap between them. It is evident through such a self-reflective lens how this concept can be helpful to examine within narrative. When we apply and examine the presentness paradigm within a text it further illuminates the probable intentions of certain characters; when looking outwardly based on our textual findings such archetypes can be useful in the necessary classification of realities. Classification and stereotype seem to be necessary to human patterns of thought, but the awareness that is gained through careful examination of those classifications within a text are useful in gaining a more objective understanding of extratextual reality. Yet another welcome irony of a reading critiquing presentness is that it must assess the text apart from the presentness of the living author. In this case, the author is not alive to confirm or explicate an interpretation. If the author had offered an explicit interpretation it would now be inaccessible or necessarily committed to writing and therefore as divorced from the text as a reader's own subjective interpretation (or, if one wished, an extension of the text also subject to interpretation). The very problem present within Stoker's narrative is essentially the basis for the interpretation that reveals the same dilemma.

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