

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE VAMPIRES: LORD RUTHVEN, COUNT DRACULA AND PRINCE LESTAT

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Abstract: The present paper attempts to explain the present day literary phenomenon of vampire fiction. Readers worldwide, especially teenagers, love novel series such as "Twilight" or "The Vampire Diaries". Authors Laurell K. Hamilton or Charlaine Harris manage to thrill fans with gripping tales of supernatural creatures and scenes of cruelty or lust. To what extent can a writer connect the reader with a charismatic or tragic character? Did Lord Byron come up with the first drinker of blood who attacks by night? Did E. A. Poe or E.T.A. Hoffman influence at all the act of vampirism? Everybody has heard about Vlad the Impaler or the seventeenth century burnings and stakings of dead bodies in Eastern Europe. But how much of it is true?

My purpose is to research works of fiction that have shaped the portrait of vampires: John William Polidori's "The Vampyre", Bram Stoker's "Dracula" and Anne Rice's "Vampire Chronicles". These artists offer an almost tangible picture of the lives of the undead and the imaginative dimensions appear inexhaustible. They know the vampires' personal struggles as humans, their secret fears and faults, their reasons to be born into death. Theoretical studies by Nina Auerbach, Kelly Hurley, Christopher Frayling and Clive Leatherdale are of valuable use. They approach matters such as: blood as a source of life, degeneration and revenge of matter, the psychoanalysis of characters.

Key-words: vampirism; the Satanic Lord; humane vs. monstrous; sexual urge; gothic bodies.

Vampirism is defined as the belief in vampires, as the act of bloodsucking or any other acts associated with vampires. The vampire is defined as “*a dead creature that by night leaves its grave to suck the blood of living people; a person who preys on others, an extortioner*”¹.

Seventeenth century literature and history presents the traditional features according to the folklore of the time. Peasants would dig out the body they suspected to be a vampire, plunge a stake into its heart and burn it; that happened whenever the community believed there were supernatural forces that threatened the well-being of their household and family.

In 1800 Tieck wrote *Wake Not the Dead* in which the vampire is Brunhilda, a female noble in Burgundy, France. Her preferred victims are children and is described as the following: “*Her tresses-dark as the raven face of the night- set off to the utmost advantage the beaming luster of her slender form.*”² Polidori wrote in 1819 *The Vampyre* in which English Lord Ruthven feeds with society ladies and innocent girls. The lord is described with a “*dead grey eye*”³ and with the “*deadly hue of his face*”⁴. In 1821 Nodier wrote *Smarra ou les Démons de la Nuit* in which Smarra (the nightmare) is associated with fantasies about a Greek female. She attacks young Lucius and is described as it follows: “*Meroe, the most beautiful of all the beauties of Thessaly, took of her turquoise ring and pressed it with her finger, to raise the enchanted stone, and reveal a creature- colorless and formless- which snarled and growled and fell on to the breast of the sorceress. “Go”, she cried, “spectre of love, go and torment the victim I have chosen for you.... If you do this, faithful slave of love, you may, when the time for dreams is over, return to the arms of the queen of nightly terrors” ... So saying, she released the monster from her blazing hand, and it began to spread its strangely colored wings: it was like a deformed, laughing dwarf, whose hands were armed with the finest metal which could cut into the skin without tearing it, and it began to drink my blood. As it bit into my heart, it grew in size, raised its enormous head and laughed.*”⁵ In 1833 Poe wrote *Berenice* in which the character is a female aristocrat who attacks her cousin. Once Berenice was “*agile, graceful and overflowing*

¹ Webster's Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus, Geddes and Grosset, 2003, UK, p.503.

² Frayling, Christopher, *Vampyres. Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1991, p. 44.

³ Frayling, Christopher, *op. cit.*, p.44.

⁴ Idem 3.

⁵ Frayling, Christopher, *op. cit.*, p.45.

with energy”⁶. But later on she falls ill: “The eyes were lifeless and lusterless and seemingly pupilless... the lips thin and shrunken”⁷. In 1865 Baring-Gould wrote *The Book of Werewolves* in which Hungarian aristocrat Elizabeth Bathory kills 650 young virgin peasants. She is described as follows: “On one occasion, a lady’s maid saw something wrong in her headdress and as a recompense for observing it, received such a box on the ears that blood flowed from her nose and spurted onto the mistress’s face: when the blood drops were washed off her face, her skin appeared much more beautiful.”⁸ In 1911 Crawford wrote *For the Blood Is the Life* in which Cristina, a gypsy girl murdered by Sicilian robbers attacks Angelo, the heir of Alario. She appears “pale with starvation, with the furious and unappeased physical hunger of her eyes.”⁹

According to Christopher Frayling, “there were four archetypal vampires in the nineteenth century fiction: the Satanic Lord(Polidori and derivatives), the Fatal Woman(Tieck, Hoffmann, Gautier, Baudelaire, Swinburne and le Fanu), the Unseen Force(O’Brien, de Maupassant) and the Folkloric Vampire(Mérimée, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Linton and Burton).”¹⁰

The Satanic Lord is the most common type of vampire, reminding me of Count Dracula; he is ferocious, eager to punish his victims and torment them. Sadomasochism can be related to vampirism since there is a change of both pleasure and pain between the victim and the vampire. In the context of sexual attraction from both parts, the victim and the vampire can desire each other. The lord is a leader, used to have everything his way and to control everything around him.

The Fatal Woman resembles very much reality. It is for this reason that she has been portrayed as a vampire by many authors. A cunning, attractive woman knows how to lure young men and use them for her own selfish purpose. As a vampire, her need to feed makes her more desirable to men; she lures them so she make take their blood. She has a preference for the younger ones, since they’re much innocent and more likely have virgin blood.

⁶ Frayling, Christopher, *op. cit.*, p.48.

⁷ Idem 7.

⁸ Frayling, Christopher, *op. cit.*, p.52.

⁹ Frayling, Christopher, *op. cit.*, p.62.

¹⁰ Idem 9.

As unseen force, the vampire manages to torment and annoy the victims for a longer time. They blame their imagination and possible illness for the nightmares they have, the bites on their bodies and the noises at night. They don't see anything strange around their household. The Folkloric Vampire refers to the early characteristics of the creature. It leaves its grave to feed on its relatives and returns to its casket at daybreak. At night it knocks three times at the door and waits to be invited inside before he attacks. The remedy against the creature is staking and burning the body. Vampirism is also a social manifestation. The mob may or may not have a certain belief, even though what they believe in doesn't exist and their belief is incredibly stupid. Such customs occur in east-European villages isolated from cities, with uneducated people and with poor backgrounds.

A vampire isn't always someone that sucks blood but also a common person that extracts energy from the others. Mosquitoes and the vampire bat suck blood; this is how they get their energy. Well, someone at our workplace or who lives with us can take energy from us knowingly or not. Energies between people may unite wonderfully as well as retract one from the other or fight against each other with terrible consequences.

Published in 1819, John Polidori's *The Vampyre* describes Lord Ruthven, an English nobleman, his interference in the characters' lives and its terrible consequences. Lord Aubrey, an orphan gentleman with a taste for curious matters, is enthralled with mysterious Ruthven, a stranger to everybody. With a distinct, more dead-like appearance, Ruthven has a passion for young, unmarried women; he is always alone, silent and apparently meditating. Soon, Aubrey befriends him and the two travel throughout Europe.

In Rome, to Aubrey's disapproval, reckless Ruthven almost compromises a young maiden of a wealthy family. Angry with the impulsive nobleman, Aubrey parts with him and goes to Athens where he meets a kind innkeeper and his daughter, the fair Ianthe. No sooner does the young man fall in love with her that he loses Ianthe to the attacks of a powerful beast. Ruthven had followed Aubrey ever since his departure from Rome and pretends to be his aid in disaster. When Aubrey falls terribly ill after Ianthe's death, Ruthven stays at his side, acting like a friend. After Aubrey recovers from his fever, the two start a journey in a dangerous surrounding where they are attacked by robbers. Heavily wounded by a gunshot, Ruthven asks

Aubrey to grant him a last wish. He shall conceal Ruthven's existence and his wrongdoings from every living soul for a year and a day.

To his shock, Aubrey finds evidence that Ruthven was the aggressor in the forest hut the night Ianthe was murdered. He returns to Rome where he learns from the parents that their young daughter whom Ruthven took advantage had mysteriously disappeared. Realizing that the monster destroyed everything he touched and that, nonetheless, he must keep his oath, Aubrey has a nervous breakdown. His close ones, including the physician and young sister Lady Aubrey, believe him insane.

A year later, Aubrey is enlivened by the prospects of his sister's marriage with the Earl of Marsden. However, he loses his temper when learning that Lady Aubrey's husband-to-be is in fact Ruthven. Desperate to save his sister, Aubrey tries to persuade everyone to postpone the wedding for a few hours so that he may expose Ruthven. His efforts are in vain and dies after a crisis but not before confessing the vampire's monstrous acts. The friends' attempt to save Lady Aubrey are hopeless since she is already turned into an undead. In addition, Ruthven disappears leaving no trace.

Published in 1897, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is one of the most powerful novels that continue to thrill and surprise even today. This work elaborates details about the history, topography, geography and folklore of Transylvania("*Beyond the green swelling hills of the Mittel Land rose mighty slopes of forest up to the lofty steeps of the Carpathians themselves. Right and left of us they towered, with the afternoon sun falling full upon them and bringing out all the glorious colors of this beautiful range, deep blue and purple in the shadow of the peaks, green and brown where grass and rock mingled, and an endless perspective of jagged rock and pointed crags, till these were themselves lost in the distance, where the snowy peaks rose grandly.*"¹¹). In addition, it makes use of a clear language and perfect organization of content. It also follows slowly through the minds of the characters, enabling the construction of a terrifying scene.

The novel is constructed into letters, journal and diary extracts. The excerpts are characters' personal accounts of their experiences. The reader is introduced in the context easily,

¹¹ Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*, Penguin Books, Great Britain, 1994, p.16.

following what seems at the start an adventure novel. The text leaves a lasting impression because of the mixture of feelings possessed by the characters. Nonetheless, it is all about affection and the need for the other half. Dracula hopes to have found his eternal bride in Mina. The reader witnesses scenes of extreme lust and cruelty but at the end he/she learns of the vulnerable sides of each character. Jonathan is the passionate lover, faithful to Mina, managing to resist the attacks of Dracula's brides. Their true love wins against Dracula's poisonous interference. Mina is mesmerized by the count's appearance as a young, cultivated gentleman. His discretion and gestures take her aback and lets herself fall into his charms. Dracula intoxicates her with his blood, turning her into a temptress and enhancing her lust and femininity. Along with Van Helsing's interventions, Dracula loses everything starting from his three brides as well as Lucy. Furthermore, the plan is respected accordingly: most of the times good wins over evil in fiction and on television as well.

Published in 1985, Anne Rice's *The Vampire Lestat* tells the story of Lestat's life as a mortal and his efforts to understand his nature as an undead. In late eighteenth century France, married to a rich landowner, bored housewife Gabrielle grows fond on her youngest son, Lestat. Their mutual interest on each other drives them to push away the other family members. The father is cruel and cold-hearted and it is on this pretext that Gabrielle develops an erotic relationship with her favorite son. The two grow cold on the father and on Lestat's siblings and plan to kill the father and runaway. Gabrielle, however, acts according to a more realistic plan; she convinces her husband to send Lestat to study in Paris. Mother and son communicate permanently through letters and Lestat starts a relationship with Nikolas, having Gabrielle's support. After encountering Magnus who later turns Lestat into a vampire, Gabrielle flees from her household to join her son. Lestat turns both his mother and Nikolas into vampires.

Vlad The Impaler, the 15th century Wallachian voivode, would be extremely cruel by impaling his enemies. His reputation inspired Bram Stoker to create the famous Count although the first modern vampire story is Polidori's. All vampires, including Rice's are similar in respect to their physical appearance, supernatural powers and thirst for blood. Compared to Ruthven, Dracula is the first vampire part of a complex narrative whereas Lestat is the contemporary brat prince and rock superstar. When interfering to save Ianthe, Aubrey is taken aback by the opponent's incredible strength and manner to disappear. While aboard the Demeter, the seaman

describes Dracula as a shadow he couldn't pierce with his dagger. Jonathan observes the count's lizard-like climbing of the castle wall; the vampire can take a different appearance just like Raglan James does in Rice's *The Tale of The Body Thief*. The vampire can communicate with beasts, can turn into a bat or a wolf and travels to anywhere, no matter how far. Challenged by David Talbot's ignorance towards his powers, Lestat grows more fond of him and finally turns him into an undead. By doing this, he gives in to his monstrous side, leaving behind their close friendship and all they have been through when defeating James, the body thief. Approached by one of the vampire brides, Jonathan notices her pointy teeth, the feline look and the way she licks her mouth before attacking the prey. Dracula communicates through his mind with Mina and Renfield the way Armand does with Daniel Molloy or Marius with Lestat.

The body is both a source of desire and a weapon of destruction. In *The Vampire Chronicles* the body is described as means by which everything is possible. The characters desire one another in order to feed or they wish to destroy their enemies by butchering them. At least this is how Armand deals with Claudia and Madeline. Rice describes scenes of extreme cruelty that involve the destruction of the body. Akasha kills the other vampires by means of spontaneous combustion. They burn from the inside out and what's left is a dark liquid and their clothes floating on it. When killed by Mekare, Akasha has her head plucked from her body; Mekare respected the curse she inflicted on Akasha thousands of years before. In *The Gothic Body*, Kelly Hurley speaks about the destruction and fragmentation of *the human*: "*The abhuman subject is a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other. The prefix "ab- " signals a movement from a site or condition, and thus a loss. But a movement away from is also a movement towards- towards a site or condition as yet unspecified- and thus entails both a threat and a promise*"¹². Finding no meaning in their existence of hundreds of years, Rice's vampires kill themselves or get maimed. Magnus and Alessandra burn themselves alive to get rid of the bodies that kept them wretched. Lestat exchanges his body with James' for the sake of being human again. In addition, he exposes his body to the sun and attempts to immolate himself just to test his limits as well as the ones in the material world. Ruthven dies a false death. In spite of his decomposed body as a result of the wounds, the robbers alongside Aubrey find it missing. When Jonathan finds the

¹² Hurley, Kelly, *The Gothic Body*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain, 1996, pp.3, 4.

count in his tomb, he attempts to destroy him by hitting his head with a shovel. Dracula turns his head with a monstrous expression and is only left with a bloody cut in the forehead.

Evil creatures, the vampires follow a detailed plan in order to obtain what they want. Dracula gets revenge by attempting to establish a British vampire empire. *“Stoker seems to be harking back to Vlad Țepeș, who(...) needed to avenge the deaths of his father and brother and his own adolescent incarceration at the hands of the Turks. If Count Dracula could not take revenge on the Turks, the superpower of his time, he could at least direct it against the modern superpower. Britain must pay the penalty for the crimes of the Ottomans. Further, Britain has come to symbolize the ingratitude and treachery of Christian Europe, which betrayed Dracula while he was fighting the Turks in their interests”*¹³. At the same time, the count is deceitful and cruel towards Jonathan when promising to let him leave the castle. He plays with the man’s mind when he points that outside hungry wolves are waiting for him to come out. Compared to the count’s plans, Ruthven only takes away all of Aubrey’s people who are dear to him. During their confrontation on his intention to marry his sister, the malefic lord reminds Aubrey of his oath and of the risk that the lady might lose her honor. This is the last drop that drives Aubrey to another crisis. At the same time, while preying on David, Lestat is cunning and perverse just like Ruthven and Dracula. He reminds David that man cannot fully trust a beast even after taming it.

Rice admits that her vampires are nevertheless the readers and all of us. These creatures are constructed having the same fears, obsessions and hesitations when confronted with hasty decisions. Their limits as vampires illustrate out limits as humans. They have negative moral features like people do. Their inner strength lies in the fact that they are aware of their beastly impulses and their monstrous appearance. They know what they are with their good and their bad characteristics. Surprisingly enough, they envy the human condition as it is. They would love to be human again to live life with its ups and downs. Moreover they are aware with their place among people and try their best not to affect in a negative way the rhythm of daily life.

¹³ Leatherdale, Clive, *Dracula. The Novel and The Legend*, Desert Island Books, Brighton, 1993, p.111.

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