

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY TOWARDS LIGHT. ANNE RICE'S CHRISTIAN FICTION

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Abstract: Religion has been a frequent topic in most novels, especially the present day ones. That's because in thrillers and in their movie adaptations the Church is used to develop conspiracy theories, mysterious murders, dangerous schemes or setups.

Contrasts and contradictions are useful when making a script or a novel subject. One's belief in God would be an intimate aspect in one's life. Matters of the Church used to be separate from the outside preoccupations and scandals. Today, however, exposure by all means is the best way to make money. The trick is to make the impossible possible. Authors approach any writing genre as long as it is successful to the public. Movies like "Angels and Demons" or "După Dealuri" present aggressive and murderous priests, their thirst for money and power.

Renowned author Anne Rice approached genres like erotica, horror, thriller, religious literature, the memoir. Her lifelong mission has been to find answers regarding the existence of God. She traced down Christianity up to its very beginning.

The aim of this article is to understand our need to believe in God. We have reasons why we do this. Why we summon angels, Christ or the Virgin Mary. At the same time we will find arguments why Anne Rice made significant changes regarding her faith.

Key-words: faith in God; Christianity; guarding angel; the Catholic Church; vampire.

A topic Rice was often mentioned in the media for is her faith in God. Not only did her relationship with God suffer changes throughout her life but she also kept this subject in the public eye. She always kept in touch with her fans on her latest achievements and states of mind; she's quite active on the internet. In addition, she always posted her considerations about the Church and God or she discussed these issues on TV. She's a public figure loved by many because she is open-minded and tells things to your face. Rice shares what she learns from her studying and her personal life with people all over the world.

Rice's vampires admire people's perfect imperfections, wishing they would return to their initial state and body. Destiny, however, throws them into a world of hardship and loneliness. The steps are always the same: the creator is at his victim's deathbed and he/she asks the other if he/she wishes the Dark Gift. Most likely in pain and with lack of judgement, the victim agrees and later finds himself/herself a blood drinker.

Interview with The Vampire describes the love triangle between Lestat, Louis and Claudia. Each of Rice's vampires is trapped in his/her low condition of existence. They are incomplete and that's frustrating to them. Lestat lives death to the fullest. Louis curses the day he was born into death and Claudia feels wretched, a woman stuck in the body of a school girl.

Louis, the most romantic of all the vampires, wishes he would die, since he hates his condition of existence. Like a child, he believes it's sinful to kill and drink someone's blood in order for him to survive. Louis' lifestyle seems unnatural to him and feels cursed. Owner of a Louisiana plantation at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Louis' workers and slaves grow suspicious of him and his mysterious partner Lestat. Sensitive and caring Louis drives away the people from his land and burns down the house he was living in.

Rice's inner voice are her vampires. She speaks through them in her novel and rebels against a God whom she feels betrayed her. As a result, she started to search about her birth place and created *Interview with The Vampire* which is set in the nineteenth century New Orleans. She spoke, more precisely, through curious newborn Louis who was just beginning to learn about the new world he was born to by his creator. Lestat lives death to the fullest, eager to be in the centre of attention. It is him who slowly but surely stole the show and took the leading part in Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*. He is the in-your-face, rebel-hearted rascal who laughs at everyone and believes himself to be the world. He is opposite to Louis and his strength and stubbornness convinced Rice to let him take the narration forward. She wanted to create the impossible and build the sharply ironic, bitterly funny blonde and grey-eyed figure.

Set in seventeenth century France, the novel *The Vampire Lestat* tells the coming of age of the main character of *The Vampire Chronicles*. 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. Gabrielle 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.

In *The Vampire Armand*, the eponymous character is a tormented human who suffers a great deal and never fully recovers from the moral pain. His life is eventful and filled with changes. As a result, Armand is a character taken into different worlds and identities, not having a choice. It is for this reason that he appears pious, lonely and mysterious.

As Andrei, he is brought up in the Russian background that denigrates the physical. This culture describes the priests who bury themselves and who eat lesser each day, expecting their death. Kidnapped from his homeland and taken as a slave, he is adopted by vampire Marius. He becomes Amadeo and is plunged into the world of Venice during the Renaissance; a period that offered a completely different approach to life. It celebrated the beauty of the art, the human body and the world. His relationship with Marius suffers great changes including Marius' rejection for Amadeo's sake. Amadeo cannot adapt to this new life and before he knows it, his adopted home is ravaged by the Children of the Darkness.

The Queen of the Damned reunites all of Rice's vampires. For, they must protect the world from destructive Akasha. The mother of all vampires wants to rule according to her mindless plan to destroy all men. Her mind stuck in ancient Egypt, where she was brought up, Akasha cannot follow what the other vampires try to prove. The group is in the twentieth century; to Marius and the rest of the vampires, who have watched the world's evolution for centuries, it is clear that people can make ends meet with no need of supernatural intervention. Together with their realizations as well as disasters due to bad decisions, history has proven that the humans have their own life cycle. It's a natural transformation from birth, an evolution of the body and mind to a slow decay and death. Alongside disappointment, desperation and loss, people have managed to create a world of their own that evolves naturally, that cannot be fully controlled.

It's funny how a particular circumstance leads someone to a revelation, to an event that will change one's life. In 1998, while doing research on Christianity, Anne Rice found out that the Jewish people survived mysteriously the murders and disasters of ages that cast upon them. Finding no explanation for such a detail, she realized there is such thing as divine intervention. It's God that is all knowing and can protect one in moments of distress.

Rice felt that dedicating a work of fiction to Christ was the one thing to do. Upon her rediscovery of faith, she wrote two books in the collection *Songs of the Seraphim*. The two works follow Toby O'Dare's evolution from a cold-hearted assassin to a fulfilled young man who found the answers to his existential crisis and thus found salvation in the Lord's hands.

An assassin paid by the government, Toby is met by a surprise immediately after killing his victim. Malchiah, a seraphim, approaches him and offers Toby a way out of darkness. Nothing's accidental and the mind works miracles. Toby knew something would happen on that very day because he had to complete a mission in the place most dear to him; a Californian hotel where he feels at ease, away from the hustle and the bustle. This way, his insecurity took its toll especially when he observed a silhouette in the darkness. It was a mysterious creature that appeared from nowhere. Malchiah appears to be from another world; his look, attitude and voice were supernatural and charmed Toby from the very start.

Toby's existence meant a continuous torment, a back and forth movement that only made him miserable. He is a murderer, certain he will pay for his sins in hell and takes revenge on God by means of his missions. That's because God took his loved ones away from him and he couldn't cope with the grief. On the other hand, in spite of the blood on his hands, he visits a little catholic church where he finds peace. He feels regrets for his deeds and thinks about past dreams that will never come true. He loved to play the lute and had a profound love for God and the Church. He wanted to become either a successful artist or a dedicated priest.

Toby's continuous murdering to quench the anger caused by his misfortune do anything but help; it keeps dragging him down until he hits rock bottom and is filled with dark thoughts. He knows what he's doing is wrong but he sees no other way out since he's cursed and a wretched soul anyway. So why change for the better if sins like his can never be forgiven? To him, there is no God in this world, not a single event or moment to confirm a heavenly presence or support.

Albeit, Toby still calls his angel. There's a voice of hope deep inside him which he uses in his darkest times. He requests help from his angel, for he didn't know how he was going to cope with killing in the room dearest to him; in the place where he would get away from it all, where he would dare to see himself a better person than he thought he was. But for this divine intervention there needed an angel of a higher status; a seraphim. Malchiah catches Toby's attention and arrives at the right time. As was expected, the Devil and Malchiah fight for Toby's soul. Once one understands the cause of any trouble, one will have the solution in front of him/her. Toby is like a fish with no water, striving to find a light in his darkened, rigid soul. This way, Malchiah takes him back in time while telling Toby's life story. Events occur in front of his eyes as Malchiah carries on, providing all the relevant details. To Toby's horror, everything happened exactly as the seraphim says; it's as if he was there all along.

Toby is taken back to 13th century in Norwich, England where the Jewish community is threatened to death by the Christians. Disguised as a Dominican monk, Toby must help Jews Fluria and Meir; they are accused by Christians and the Dominicans that they murdered their daughter Lea because she entered a Christian church on Christmas evening and got baptized. Toby helps Fluria rejoin her family after hard work and heavenly miracles. His mission completed, Toby wakes up at Mission Inn in his favorite room where his incredible adventure started. He finds himself a changed person, eager to start anew, with a strong belief in the power of God.

Rice used Dickens' technique, present in many of his tales. First, the character's wretchedness is presented, then he's visited by a being from another world. A messenger that gives him a warning about the character's future prospects. The character is then taken back in time so that he/she observes both his realizations and mistakes. The climax is described in the moment of utmost pressure for the character: Gabriel Grub's attacks by the group of little devils, Scrooge's glance at his grave site, Toby's beating by his victims of the past that came back to haunt him. It is in this moment of great distress that the character wakes up to find it was all a dream; that there's always hope for the better.

Toby came a long way from an insecure, shy boy to a cold-hearted murderer and finally to a courageous, clear-headed young man who felt satisfied and hopeful after completing an act of kindness. Obviously, he was hesitant and scared like a child when he encountered Malchiah. He felt the same as insecure and with a low self-esteem while dating Liona. He felt he wasn't worthy of her because of his poor background. He believed he was trash and only deserved the worse. By helping Fluria and Meir, his self-esteem grew and felt good about something. People can change for the better as long as they do it with a clear purpose and take care of themselves. Nonetheless, change occurs anyway at different stages of life; one's achievement is to keep away from dark thoughts as long as possible. Clearly enough, the name "Toby O'Dare" indicates a daring, bold young man who risks everything just to feel at peace with himself.

According to the notes she makes at the beginning of the book, Rice points that angels surround children at their every step, that they love people who repent their sins and that God wants His angels to protect people.

Toby is blond and grey-eyed just like Lestat and despises God because he cannot prove His existence. This character lost God years ago and sees his boss as a god who decides who will die next. Toby also known as Lucky Fox is the messenger, the angel of death who fulfills

his god's wishes. Ironically, he soon finds himself in a divine mission alongside a real messenger of God. Toby feels he is nothing but a killing machine and finds his humane side only when he visits Mission Inn. He identifies with its peace and architecture; the building and its surroundings are like a puzzle. He feels like a puzzle, a body made up of various parts and features. He remembers his time in New Orleans where his childhood and inner pain are buried. His hometown is the same as Anne Rice's; she also passed on to him her loving of Shakespeare and the Brontë sisters. Toby feels cursed for having found a place that suits his spiritual needs and offers him peace; he feels cursed for not being let to keep this place as his secret escape. When encountering Malchiah, there's a battle in Toby's mind between God and Satan. On one hand he wants to kill himself and escape prison; on the other hand he is impressed by the stranger's loving voice and look.

Liona seemed everything Toby had ever hoped for but he had a feeling that it was too good to be true. Worries and mistrust filled up his mind, not feeling worthy of her. When discovering the bodies of his three relatives, Toby observed his mother attentively. She looked as if she were drained out of blood, like a peal, like a vampire. It is in this tragic scene that Toby loses his breath from God and His angels. The dead mother surrounded by a pool of blood is a reminder of Lestat having his neck cut by Claudia. Rice uses the image of the vampire in this particular scene to incriminate the very creature, the character by whom she lived for almost forty years. But she let go of the vampire metaphor, feeling she didn't belong to it anymore.

Toby ran away from disaster and bitter disappointment; he coped with the pain by leaving his dead family alongside his dear lute. He feels the huge burden of guilt for everything that happened. When arriving in Manhattan, the city and all of the people around seemed ghost-like. Toby's parents were alcoholics just like Anne Rice was before she gave birth to son Christopher. Rice lost her mother at a young age to alcoholism and her daughter Michelle to leukemia. Toby associates drunkenness with death; observing a drunk person, he notices the dead stare.

Toby has the opportunity to visit Notre Dame in the 13th century when the building was almost finished. He is thankful to God for this amazing experience; he realizes he must let his entire existence into the Lord's hands. It's only He that knows the nature of things, including the evil. Rosa admits there is a universal God and that she converted to Christianity for her father's sake. When discovering everything was but a dream, Toby feels he knew the only

people he loved and who mattered to him. It's heartbreaking when he realizes he won't see Fluria and her group ever again. Rice's characters want to write books about their incredible experiences and revelations. Toby knows now what matters to him and wants to share his experience with the world.

Once she regained her faith, Anne Rice wanted to write a book about the life of Jesus Christ if it's the last thing she'll ever do in this life. *Christ the Lord* includes two books based on the life of Jesus; *Out of Egypt* presents Jesus's life story from the day he is born up to the day he is twelve years old. The narrator is Jesus himself, a little boy who describes the events according to his own perception. In this novel, Jesus is introduced as a seven year-old boy brought up in a Jewish community settled in Egypt, Alexandria. Seven years before, when Mary had felt she was pregnant after the angel's message, everyone panicked since she never had sexual contact. For their own safety, Mary, Joseph and his relatives went to Bethany where they got married. Meanwhile, the three magi had foretold that Messiah will be born in Bethlehem on Christmas day. King Herod asked for them and when he learned the piece of information, he ordered his soldiers to kill all babies younger than three. Joseph and Mary ran away from their relatives' household in Bethany and hid in a kind people's manger in Bethlehem where she gave birth to Jesus. They travelled from one town to another until they established in Alexandria.

Now a seven year-old boy, Jesus performs miracles by mistake when playing with the neighboring children. Reluctant to such manifestations, the Egyptian neighbors bid the Jews to leave. Joseph and his family travel back home in Israel where they want to reach the Temple at Jerusalem to get the Holy Communion for the Easter celebration. They are met with battles, Roman soldiers killing rebels as well as innocent people. The family encounter relatives on the way and finally manage to return home in Nazareth. After five years of life loss and misery, Jesus and his family reach the Temple in Jerusalem in order to confess their sins and take the Holy Communion.

Joseph has numerous dreams in which an angel tells him what to do. He warns him to leave Nazareth when Mary is pregnant, so that they protect the baby. The angel also warns the man to leave for Israel because the time is now. Little Jesus knows he's special and is frustrated that nobody tells him about the day the he was born. He kills Lazarus with a mere thought and then resurrects him; he transforms two clay birds into real ones, he can start the rain and heal the wounded. He takes away Cleopas' illness with a profound pray and does the same when

giving a blind man his sight back. At the same time, Jesus' dreams are but evocations of real events: Herod's soldiers killing the babies, the horseman deathly injured with a spere, the Temple at Jerusalem filled with blood and people screaming everywhere. All the people's hardships and pain that he witnesses are inflicted on him. Another strong vision he has in a dream is the encounter he has with a demon that speaks badly about his origins and about his mother; the creature prides on his power and threatens he would defeat a little boy like Jesus. His mother, however, advises him wisely: "*Keep your power inside you. Guard it until your Father in Heaven shows you the time to use it. If he's made you a child, then he's made you a child to grow in wisdom as well as in everything else.*"¹

The novel's point of view resembles very much the one used in *Great Expectations*. When referring to a book she turns to when in a creative blockage, Rice admits it's usually Dickens' *Great Expectations*. It's also a book she recommends alongside *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Both Jesus and Pip are little boys presenting events according to their own naive interpretation; their innocence and fright whenever they get into trouble is what made them irresistible to readers worldwide. They're unreliable and share to the reader whatever they remember or think it's relevant.

Anne Rice used to be a church going person. She went alongside family members and felt she couldn't live without God. She received religious education in an American parish with the strictness typical for Catholicism. God assured her the spiritual life she needed.

At the age of eighteen she gave up her faith because she wanted to break free from the straight jacket of rules and limits. She wanted to read books that were forbidden to her like the ones by Camus, Kierkegaard or Sartre and wanted to explore the world with its ups and downs. She was young and with a need to live life appropriately, according to her own decisions. She believed that to grow up someone had to put away God. Having given a strict religious upbringing, she had to break away and find an inner voice. Too much of anything makes anybody sick. Her loss of God was exactly like losing the one closest to your heart. She grieved over her loss for thirty-eight years, as an agnostic; a wanderer in the depths of darkness. Faith in God is a sensitive topic and it's complicated to explain it; you either believe in something fiercely or you don't. Naturally, everyone needs to confirm his/her belief and expectations in a way or another. It doesn't matter if it's about a miracle or just one's imagination. One has to believe in something, be it silly or not.

¹ Rice, Anne, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2008, p.240.

Rice's vampires are against their life without God. Throughout *The Vampire Chronicles* these characters make ends meet in trying to get more power to mingle with the humans and copy them, to find answers whether there is or there isn't a God. An atheist may be either happy with his faith or he may be expecting a sign; something that will convince him/her that there is an energy that works for and through him/her. Not all people are open to divine experiences or to high levels of harmony like the yoga practitioners achieve. Lestat's adventures in Rice's novels take him from the powerful experience when contacting Saint Veronica's Veil to a terrifying ride in the depths of hell alongside Memnoch the Devil. Both of these experiences almost cost him his life. He exposed himself to immolation because he wanted to die; his life in death bored and proved worthless. There wasn't anything to encourage and challenge him. As an eternal undead, he leads a cursed existence.

Rice is an alter-ego of her vampires. They want God desperately and they need Him but are too proud to admit it. Inner harmony and peace is achieved when thinking positive and believing in your interior love and energy. Anything good in anyone is God. The most common misconception about God is that He's all-knowing like no one else is and has the power to do both good and evil; He takes pride on it and is able to teach anyone a lesson or to allow calamities, murders and natural disasters. But everything happens for a reason and life follows its course. One cannot find an answer for all the questions and topics like faith and God cannot be used in a discussion. Everybody has the right to believe in anything or not to believe in anything at all.

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