

WHAT STOKER SAW: AN INTRODUCTION TO

THE HISTORY OF THE LITERARY VAMPIRE

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When Bram Stoker's Dracula first came out in 1897, it was an immediate success, a horror writer's "stroke of genius." But Stoker's novel was not a work based on Stoker's imagination alone. Two elements contributed to the success of his novel: a great deal of historical and ethnographic research, and an extensive, already existing body of vampire fiction.

It is to this existing body of vampire literature that the modern reader owes his notion of what a vampire is. We tend to think of vampires as figures from folklore, but the image we have of them has been largely predetermined by the literary, not the folkloric, vampire. The origin of the literary vampire lies in folklore, but literature has greatly reworked and remolded the vampire into a recognizable literary type to suit its own needs and purposes.

The Literary History of the Vampire

Though vampires and lamias appear in classical tales and literature (Ovid, Apuleius, Petronius' Satyricon, Flavius Philostratos, and others), references to these supernatural creatures are not sufficiently numerous or consistent to be considered a coherent and developed body of vampire literature. This literature, though of interest, will not be considered here.

The modern literary vampire first made its appearance in a period of reaction against the domination of rationalism. Vampire literature per se is a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, a result of Romanticism and of the interest in folklore encouraged by Herder's romantic nationalism. Through German Romanticism, the vampire made his way from folklore into the realm of literature, where he soon became comfortable in certain character types already existing in the literature of the day.

Among the first works of modern vampire literature was Goethe's "Die Braut von Korinth" (1797), an extremely popular and influential ballad about a young woman who returns from the tomb to suck the heart's blood of her former betrothed. Influenced by this ballad, Robert Southey introduced the female vampire into English poetry in 1801 with "Thalaba the Destroyer." Even though the exotic nature of the vampire was calculated to appeal to the Gothic and Romantic writers, the vampire did not become a stock character in the Gothic tradition until the short novel The Vampyre, A Tale by Dr. John Polidori (1819).

The Vampyre was originally attributed to Byron, whose prose fragment of a vampire story, written during the same session that produced Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, formed the basis of Polidori's novel. The artistically undistinguished but interesting Vampyre introduces the detestable Lord Ruthven. This typical misanthropic Byronic hero, however, wears a new and exotic costume: he is a vampire.

The importance of this short novel cannot be overestimated, since Lord Ruthven became the prototype of male vampires in European fiction. He possesses all the characteristics we continue to meet in vampire literature: the personification of evil, great physical strength, pale, drinks blood, sexually hypnotic. The story is fast-paced and full of terrifying action. It ends with general tragedy as Lord Ruthven makes his escape, leaving only death and destruction behind him.

Though Polidori's introduction claims his dependence on scholarly ethnographic sources, it is clear that his vampire is really the disguised gothic villain (Manfred in Walpole's Castle of Otranto (1764), Clara Reeve's The Old English Baron (1777), Montoni in Mrs. Radcliffe's Mysterries of Udolpho (1794), the dark romantic heroes of Byron, and so on).

Lord Ruthven's ruthlessness, his vengefulness, his evil desire to corrupt the innocent and destroy the beautiful, his frequenting of exotic places and castle ruins, his immorality, his world-weariness--all these are characteristics of the gothic villain. To this character type Polidori added some of the more spectacular elements of vampire lore to emphasize his villain's demonic nature and to thrill the reader.

Lord Ruthven is not the standard vampire described in the scientific and pseudo-scientific literature on vampires that appeared on the continent (and particularly in Germany) in the 18th century.² In fact, Polidori plays fast and loose with actual vampire lore for the sake of both his plot and his characterization. Ruthven leaves his native soil to seek victims in London (a motif that will reappear in Stoker's novel). All of his victims are young women; in fact, the sexual element is very strong. (The two major climactic points of the story center on a "love crime"). One of the characters relates that the vampire drinks the blood of one woman each year (are there no female vampires?), yet Ruthven helps himself to several. Though Ruthven is abroad both day and night, we learn that vampires have only nocturnal powers. Ruthven's victims do not become vampires in turn; they die, while he remains the only vampire. Nor does Polidori discuss methods for the destruction of vampires. He was not concerned with these particular problems because he was not really dealing with a vampire; he was still writing about the gothic villain. But the possibilities suggested by Polidori's tale did not escape the more creative artists who followed him.

Polidori's Vampyre was immensely popular and was soon transformed into dozens of plays, numerous comic operettas, vaudevilles, and even two operas (Marschner, 1828, and Lindpainter, 1829). In the 19th century, just as in our own day, the vampire was most appreciated through the dramatic medium.³ Needless to say, many plays, novels, and stories tried to exploit the vampire craze of the 19th century. Most were of low quality, and many had nothing to do with vampires beyond the use of that intriguing word in their titles.

Polidori's novel started a deluge of translations and imitations. In England, the best-known was Thomas Preskett Prest's sensationalistic thriller Varney the Vampire, or The Feast of Blood (1847). France was a particularly ripe territory. In 1820 Charles Nodier wrote a stage play, Le Vampire, and vampire plays continued to be popular in France until after the turn of the 20th century. Even Dumas (père) wrote a play paraphrasing Polidori's tale (Le Vampire, 1851). The vampire captured Dumas' imagination. Dennis Wheatley recently discovered a long-lost Dumas novel, The Horror at Fontenay, an interesting little volume which adds two motifs to the tradition of the literary vampire: the vampire casts no shadow and has no reflection.⁴ This corresponds to the popular belief that the soul can be manifested in a shadow or reflection, and since the vampire is an animated corpse, he would not have a soul.

One of the best vampire stories in French (or in any language) is Théophile Gautier's "La Morte Amoreuse" (1836). This fascinating little story followed Goethe's lead, not Polidori's, for Gautier's vampire is a lovely courtesan whose influence involves a young priest in a double life. To the biblically-prohibited act of drinking human blood, Gautier adds the sacrilegious act of carnally seducing a man of God. Clarimonde, the vampire, is destroyed by holy water at the end of the story.

In Russia, Count Aleksei K. Tolstoi wrote two vampire novellas, "La Famille du Vourdalak" and "Oupyr" (1841). The latter is a society tale with gothic coloring, but "La Famille du Vourdalak" discusses the customs of the Southern Slavs relating to vampires. The story even refers to Dom Calmet's "curious book" and briefly discusses the Slavic vampire in an effort to stress "exotic authenticity." However, Tolstoi wrote the tales in French; only later were they translated into his native Russian. This fact indicates that A. K. Tolstoi's inspiration for the stories came not so much from Slavic folklore as from the established Western European literary tradition of supernatural fiction.

German literature also produced a number of vampire novels under Polidori's influence.

Generally speaking, they belong to the realm of sensationalistic literature and include such works as H. Zschokke's Der tote Gast and Spindler's Der Vampir und seine Braut (1826). A little more sophisticated is Theodor Hildebrand's Der Vampyr oder die Totenbraut: ein Roman nach neugriechischen Volkssagen (1828). Few are of any real merit; several of the later German vampire novels were crudely pornographic (Dr. Seltzam's Die Vampyre der Residenz, 1900).

Literary interest in vampires did not wane in the second half of the 19th century. On the contrary, a new type of vampire joined Lord Ruthven: the Fatal Woman, "La Belle Dame sans merci."⁵ Following the tradition of Goethe, Gautier, and Keats ("Lamia"), this new female vampire was more the product of literary tradition than of folklore. She was the sensual, dark heroine of romantic fiction-erotic, cruel, sadistic, demonic. She was Lilith returned, the Lamia. She was Edgar Allan Poe's embodiment of vampire love (Ligea, Berenice, Elleanora). She appeared in Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal (1857) and (under the influence of de Sade) in A. C. Swinburne's Chastelard (1865) and "Satie Te Sanguine." We find her at her most spiritual in Ivan Turgenev's "Prizraki-Fantazija" (1863). She became the ultimate blend of pain, death, and love. In most cases, she was only vaguely related to the folkloric vampire, for her function in decadent literature lay elsewhere. Decadent literature spiritualized and psychologized the vampire.

But the Fatal Woman vampire did not completely dominate the vampire literature of the second half of the 19th century. In 1872 a very important English short story appeared. This was Joseph Sheridan LeFanu's "Carmilla." It particularly influenced Bram Stoker and is a fine piece of literature in its own right. It is the story of Mircalla, a Styrian countess of the 17th century, who preys on young noblewomen. The relationship between the vampire and her victims is psychological as well as physical: there is a lesbian quality about Carmilla.⁶ Before Carmilla is discovered and staked, she draws not only Laura's blood, but her personality and being as well. This is a new, sophisticated twist in the vampire story and one of LeFanu's greatest contributions to vampire literature. The vampire is no longer simply a disguised gothic villain or a supernatural monster, but is a motivated character with his own complex psychology.

LeFanu took his material from a variety of sources. He certainly knew Dom Calmet's work and Delrio's Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex (1755), for he took an episode directly from the latter (on trapping a vampire by stealing its graveclothes). Many vampire features later appropriated by Stoker appear in "Carmilla": metamorphosis of the vampire, the ability to enter through locked doors and small apertures, inactivity during the day and the need to repose in the coffin, aversion to Christian relics, hypnotic ability, and superhuman strength. LeFanu tries not to stray too far from the documented folklore vampire in "Carmilla"; still, he cannot help adding interesting literary features. For example, LeFanu's vampire must call herself by an anagram of her name: Mircalla, Millarca, Carmilla.

The turn of the century saw a renaissance of vampire literature, a tendency possibly generated by the morbidity of the Victorian period. New, unusual kinds of vampires began to appear in literature: the botanical vampires of H. G. Wells ("The Flowering of the Strange Orchid," 1895) and F. M. White ("The Horla," 1887), Conan Doyle ("The Parasite," 1891), and Algernon Blackwood ("The Transfer," 1912). There was a rash of sensation-alistic stories and novels following the publication of Dracula, their titles designed to attract attention: Marion Crawford's For the Blood is the Life (1911), Victor Roman's Four Wooden Stakes (1925), H. R. Wakefield's They Return at Evening (1928). Enthusiasm for Dracula continues even today (Raymond Rudorff's The Dracula Archives, 1972).

In our own century, the cinema has been the major medium for transmitting the vampire image. Some of the best include Murnau's Nosferatu (1922), Browning's Dracula (1931), Hammer's Horror of Dracula (1958), and Warhol's Dracula (1974). This is a well-documented tradition and deserves no further elaboration here.

The best-known vampire novel continues to be Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897).⁷ Stoker did a great deal of research in the British Museum Library in preparation for writing his novel. There is no doubt that he did considerable work on vampirism in Eastern Europe, and probably started with Emily Gerard's travel book on Romania, The Land Beyond the Forest (Edinburgh, 1888). Gerard's book provided much of the material Stoker used about the "un-dead." Stoker may have been led to actually use Dracula as his main character by a suggestion from Professor Ármin Vámbéry, a famous Hungarian orientalist then travelling in England.⁸ Stoker was much taken by the exoticism of the name "Dracula" and did some historical research on the figure.

The historical Dracula was Vlad V, Voivode of Wallachia (1431-76), called Vlad Țepeș (The Impaler). The origin of the name "Dracula" has caused a fair amount of discussion. Grigore Nandris, who has written an article about its etymology, concludes that the word derives from "dracul" (dragon), an epithet for Vlad III, the Impaler's father, who belonged to the Order of the Dragon; the -a is a genitive suffix added to Vlad V's name by Orthodox scribes writing in Cyrillic.⁹ Some scholars have assumed that "Dracula" comes from the Romanian word for devil (also "dracul"), and in this way they connect Vlad the Impaler with the literary vampire. In Romanian folklore, however, the material for devils and vampires is mutually exclusive. Nor is it likely that this taboo word would be used to describe a line of Christian princes who built many churches and were considered heroic in their own land.

Vlad Țepeș was a Wallachian prince brought to power by János Hunyadi of Hungary in 1456. Together with Hunyadi, he managed to repel the Ottoman Turks for a brief time. He earned himself the reputation of a cruel tyrant, but historically he was no more cruel than his contemporaries—Richard III, Mahomet II, Ivan IV (the Terrible). Vlad liked to impale people on large stakes. His excesses achieved a degree of popularity, for the European reading public was mad to read about him in the broadsheets that circulated his story from about 1485 on. (Over one dozen incunabula dealing with Vlad Țepeș exist from this period). Handwritten copies of his story circulated everywhere; wandering minstrels sang of his excesses. Vlad was very popular.

In Russia, Vlad also achieved a degree of notoriety, but not for the same reasons as in Europe. In the Povest' o Mutianskom Voivode Drakule (m.s. 1490), he was a hero in the struggle against the Turks (who were a threat to Orthodox, not Roman, Christianity). Then in the 1530s and 1540s, the many episodes of the Povest' were used to justify the autocracy of Ivan IV (the Terrible), and many of the incidents in the Povest' were in time transferred from Vlad V to Ivan IV.

Though there are many real horror stories about Vlad Țepeș, there is nothing in his historical character to connect him to vampire mythology. Nor did local folk legend make him a hero.¹¹ The folklore of Hungary and Romania, however, is very rich in vampire beliefs. There is one story in particular which may have facilitated Stoker's connection between Dracula and the idea of vampirism. This is the story of Elizabeth Báthory, an early 17th century countess from the Carpathians who was called the Vampire Lady.¹⁰ She drank and bathed in the blood of an estimated 650 virgins before she was walled up in her room in 1611. In his research, Stoker may have read about the notorious Countess who came from the same general geographical area as Dracula, and considered merging the two stories. This is speculation, of course, but the folklore and the history of the area certainly could suggest many things to an enterprising writer of horror fiction.

Be that as it may, there is little doubt that Stoker purposely chose Vlad Țepeș for his Dracula because of Vlad's notoriety and his connection with an exotic area already strongly associated with vampire beliefs in reality and in the minds of his readers. Even the description of Dracula in the novel corresponds to the popularly circulated woodcut of Vlad V (though the description also owes a debt to Polidori).

Once he had his Count, Bram Stoker proceeded to write his thriller in the tradition of Victorian supernatural fiction, a genre that obviously owes much to the Gothic novel. Stoker did incorporate some new features from Romanian folklore into his novel: the connection of the vampire and the wolf, the appearance of vampires as points of light, the introduction of St. George's Eve as the time when evil spirits freely roam the earth, the use of garlic to repel vampires. In the novel Stoker also used the traditional motif that the devil can make contracts only with willing victims. Harker enters Dracula's castle to the words: "Enter freely and of your own free will!" Stoker also preserves the motif that the dead cannot cross water. Dracula is most helpless when on the water and must arrange to be transported by others across rivers and oceans.

Stoker deviates from traditional fictional vampire dogma in that his Dracula can be abroad during the day, though in a weakened state. Otherwise, Dracula is a traditional literary vampire in all other major respects, and owes his existence as much to Lord Ruthven, Varney, and Carmilla, as to folklore. The novel contains many allusions to previous horror fiction.

Conclusions

A catalog of general features will help us distinguish the literary vampire from his folkloric prototype:

1. The literary vampire is almost exclusively of aristocratic usually titled, background. This is a feature of the Gothic and Byronic heroes, and justifies the literary vampire's entrance into an elite and interesting society. In folklore, the vampire can be of any class, though most of them are from among the peasantry.
2. Although he comes from a remote and exotic area (usually in Romania or Hungary), the literary vampire travels to cities to "hunt", since urban life provides anonymity. Cities like London or Paris also provide a familiar locale for both author and reader, and heighten the necessary contrast between the known and the unknown, the commonplace and the exotic. The uninvited intrusion of the supernatural into everyday life provides the tension necessary to horror fiction. The folkloric vampire, on the other hand, remains in the vicinity of his native village.
3. The literary vampire does not "hunt" his own family. His victims are usually outside his own ethnic group and of the opposite sex. The folkloric vampire, however, does not distinguish his victims by sex. He also begins by appearing to his own family first, then to other relatives and friends in the village.
4. While the folkloric vampire is usually a recently-made vampire, the literary vampire is inevitably centuries old. Nor is he sullen or stupid, as the folkloric vampire often is; instead, he is devilishly clever, worldly-wise, and even well-read and intellectual. He is a worthy antagonist.
5. The sexual element in the relationship between the literary vampire and his victim is strong (love-death). In folklore, the vampire can return to his wife or pursue young girls, but in literature this motif is carried much further. The pursuit of the victim (the innocent female pursued by the male vampire, the helpless, weak, and often willing male pursued by the voracious female vampire) and the subsequent bite have strong overtones of eroticism and perversion. The "love crime" is the central episode in much vampire fiction.
6. The presence and function of Christianity and of the clergy assume a very important role in vampire literature, greater by far than their role in later folklore of the vampire. This is a reflection of contemporary European religious values, and not a motif taken from folklore. Folkloric vampires are usually contained by extra-Christian methods (staking, powerful plants, burning, and so on).

7. The folkloric vampire is a supernatural monster. The literary vampire began by imitating this, and early fictional vampires are personifications of pure evil (Lord Ruthven). By the end of the 19th century, the literary vampire had developed beyond the level of a supernatural demon; he had become a sufferer. As Dracula is struck by Harker's and Morris' knives, Mina Harker observes Dracula's face: "In that moment of final dissolution, there was in the face a look of peace, such as I never could have imagined might have rested there." Anyone familiar with literary tradition will recognize in the literary vampire the traditional Gothic and Byronic heroes. The vampire is often an individual who has challenged God and lost, but who continues willfully, stubbornly, on his way. At times he tires of what he is, but his own pride and divine retribution negate his penitence. The literary vampire belongs to the tradition of Prometheus, Milton's Satan, Faust, and Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew.¹² To this basic figure were added the colorful and decorative superstitions of Eastern Europe. The accommodation of this literary type, however, accounts for most of the major differences between the literary and the folkloric vampire.

8. In folklore, one can become a vampire in a variety of ways: by being the victim of a vampire, by dying as a sorcerer or witch, by being a particularly evil or cursed person, by permitting an animal to jump over the corpse, and in scores of other ways. The origin of the literary vampire is most often very mysterious, but an ancient pact with the devil is often indicated.

9. Vampires in literature have remarkable staying power. Unlike the folkloric vampire, who is discovered through a ritual and then burned or staked, the literary vampire has remarkable regenerative powers. Lord Ruthven, for instance, is wounded and appears to die. He is revived when the full moon's rays strike his body as it lies in his coffin on a mountain top. The folkloric vampire lacks this ability. The actual killing of the vampire in literature usually conforms to the sensationalistic methods suggested by folklore (such as staking). It is hard even for a talented horror writer to improve on a good thing.

The vampire became a stock literary character only when the scientific, rationalistic 19th century forced him out of his folkloric environment and into the new image-carrying element in our culture: literature. His appearance in literature was facilitated by Herder's romantic nationalism and a renewed interest in the folklore heritage of the various European nations. In literature, the vampire found his own level, combining his historical and folkloric features with the character of the Gothic villain. In this new environment the character of the vampire gradually underwent a psychological probing-impossible in his folklore environment-which elucidated the meaning of his character in a new and exciting way. Literature examined, more explicitly and from a wide variety of view points the nature of evil locked within the figure of the vampire, and adapted that figure to suit the needs and understandings of the authors who generated it and the reading public it served. So we see that the images and figures of folklore do not die and disappear. Being fluid, the vampire metamorphoses and disguises himself, appearing again in new ways as times and conditions change.

NOTES

1. Byron had picked up on vampires early. "The Giaour" (1813) contains a classic passage which indicates that Byron knew more than simply the basics about vampires. The vampire he describes corresponds to what we know about folkloric vampires:

But first on earth, as Vampyre sent,
Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent;
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
And suck the blood of all thy race;

There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
 At midnight drain the stream of life,
Yet loathe the banquet, which perforce
 Must feed thy living, livid corpse,
 Thy victims, ere they yet expire,
 Shall know the demon for their sire;
 As cursing thee, thou cursing them,
 Thy flowers are withered on the stem.

Polidori was part of Byron's circle in 1816.

2. The best-known and most often cited was Dom Augustin Calmet's Traité sur les Apparitions des Esprits, et sur les Vampires, ou les Revenans de Hongrie, de Moravie, etc. (Paris: 1745), the first English edition in 1759.
3. For a lengthy discussion of the vampire in 19th century drama, see Montague Summers, The Vampire, His Kith and Kin (London: 1928).
4. Alexandre Dumas, The Horror at Fontenay (N.Y.: St. Martin, 1976). The novel may have grown out of his little book Les mille et un fantômes (Paris: 1849), where there is a story named "Le Rue de Diane à Fontenay-aux-Roses."
5. Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (London: 1933).
6. LeFanu's story indicates that he was familiar with earlier vampire literature, particularly Coleridge's poem "Christabel."
7. Dracula has recently appeared in a new edition, annotated by Leonard Wolf: The Annotated Dracula (N.Y.: 1975).
8. Dracula contains a reference to a Hungarian professor Arminius, possibly a bow to Ármin Vámbéry.
9. Grigore Nandris, "A Philological Analysis of Dracula...", Slavonic and East European Review XXXVII (June 1959):371-77.
10. For more information on Countess Elizabeth Bathory, see Gabriel Ronay, The Dracula Myth (London: 1972).
11. Though it might have. Often persons who were very evil in their lifetime might become vampires after death. But in Romanian history, Vlad V is not a villain.
12. In fact, the actual relationship between Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) and Stoker's Dracula has been overlooked. There is a definite literary kinship in the character of the protagonists.