

REVIEW ESSAY

The vampire before and after Stoker's *Dracula*

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Paul Barber. *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. Pb ix + 236pp. ISBN 0-300-04859-9.

Carol A. Senf. *The Vampire in 19th Century Literature*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988. Pb vii + 204pp. ISBN 0-87972-425-0.

Brian J. Frost. *The Monster with a Thousand Faces: Guises of the Vampire in Myth and Literature*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989. Pb viii + 152. ISBN 0 87972 460 9.

Although this is a review rather than a survey of three related but not overlapping volumes and of their place in the evolving lore of the vampire, they can, in a suitable sense, be treated in the general order in which they are listed above,¹ not least since Paul Barber's engrossing 1990 text, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* serves as a fine introduction to a socio-cultural field which is treated very thoroughly in its major printed disquisition by Carol Senf's *The Vampire in 19th Century English Literature* (1988), and finally in the multi-media, multi-disciplinary survey by Brian J. Frost, *The Monster with a Thousand Faces: Guises of the Vampire in Myth and Literature* (1989). Significantly all three volumes come from North American university presses, as is more than appropriate

since that continent, perhaps more than any other, has accepted and developed this age-old (European) heritage and helped it to evolve in ways that are consonant both with its folklore of migrant genesis and with the post-modern popular culture and legends of the later twentieth century.

The first author, Paul Barber, is by profession an ethnographer associated with the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, Los Angeles, and he is blessed with a considerable curiosity as to the worldwide background to centuries of folklore, largely European, about vampires. He offers in his study the first scientific explanation for the origins of the vampire legends. The author's probing goes into the medical and anthropological background of early accounts of vampirism. His research was begun in an attempt to find the answer to the question of a possible link between the bog bodies of Northern Europe and the vampires of the Slavs. Thus the researcher moved from vampires, through an investigation of burial practices, to a consideration of what is meant by death in (forensic) pathology. The ordering and titles of his nineteen chapters reflect this progression, as in: XII, The Body after Death; XVII, Body Disposal and Its Problems; XVIII, The Soul after Death; and XIX, Keeping Body and Soul Apart. As Barber stresses, very helpfully, at the outset:

What this book is really about is how people in pre-industrial cultures look at the process and phenomena associated with death and the dissolution of the body (p. 1).

His challenge to us to change our perspective and look at the happenings with the eyes of the contemporaries who experienced /reported the events and to forget the modern pre-conceptions, particularly those derived from the impact of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, *Dracula*. We are also asked to analyse the reports from a variety of disparate cultures—e.g. those of China, Indonesia, the Philippines—as to dead people who “having died before their time, not only refuse to remain dead but return to bring death to their friends and neighbors” (p. 2).

Another of Barber's important scholarly advances is to distinguish between the various distorting forms in which the vampire's story is told, preferring to by-pass the “fairy-tale” narrative and later fictions, and concentrate on the generously representative, if not numerous, surviving accounts from those

earlier persons, largely officials and doctors, who dug up bodies in various European graveyards, and, having declared them to be revenants or vampires, "killed" them by various means. These accounts are matched with modern forensic pathology,² and its knowledge of death and decomposition. This leads to the modern investigator's seeing the legends as coming from a preliterate culture's attempts to account for disease and death, usually by blaming the fact of (further sudden) death on the already (recent) dead, endeavouring to appropriate them in various ways, and then often "killing" them again. A last most helpful distinction made progressively is that between the fictional vampire, a tall thin sallow aristocratic figure who lives in a castle, drinks blood from the neck, and has occult powers; and the folkloric vampire, who is plump and ruddy, may attack the chest and heart of his victim, is of peasant stock and sleeps by day in the graveyard in which he was buried.

As *The Oxford English Dictionary* has long recorded, the earlier eighteenth century was a time of considerable interest in the vampire, particularly in Germany. And so it is appropriate that Barber investigate first the case of Peter Plogojowitz (1725), a Serbian peasant who died at the beginning of an epidemic, and so is held responsible for all the following deaths—*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. The disinterred body, inspected by a priest and the official Provisor of Giddisk, is stated to be "completely fresh", but changed in various ways, with fresh blood flowing through his mouth and ears while, when it is staked, "wild signs took place".³ Then follows the 1591 case of the "Shoemaker of Breslau", a suicide whose recurring hauntings resulted in the body being twice dug up, on the final occasion to be decapitated, dismembered, cut open and burned. Then follows analysis of the famous investigative report, signed by Johannes Fluchinger and other Regimental Medical Officers and known as *Visum et Repertum* (Seen and Discovered), of an outbreak of Serbian vampirism. In this case the victims of the first vampire became vampires, as do all those who eat the flesh of cattle attacked by him.

Then follows the analysis from the Frenchman, Pitton de Tournefort, of the dissection of a Greek urykolakas, who was really only a troublesome person, now become a ghost. Speculation then occurs as to the likely factors bringing revenants into

existence, namely: (1) predisposition⁴ (from the deceased temper); (2) predestination; (3) previous events of a sinister sort; and (4) various things left undone, particularly standard (religious) funerary and burial practices, including the fact of the earlier social and post mortem neglect of certain persons who die alone. Absence of *rigor mortis* as a symptom of vampirism is a folkloric fallacy, since all corpses soon attain this flexible state, while the traditional "whiteness" of the liver may merely be due to cirrhotic causes. The "chubbiness" of corpses, a decomposing factor, has been omitted in accounts of fictional vampires as not sufficiently sinister (pp. 44-45).

The long discussion of apotropaics (or the methods of turning away evil) in cases of potential revenants, is exhaustive, treating corpse mutilation, physical restraints, preventative funerary rites (e.g. burial face downwards), provision of placatory grave goods or foods, use of a crucifix, plugging of a corpse's orifices, strewing nearby various granular substances, putting a sickle in the grave (this last a possible origin of the Grim Reaper concept), and other notional preventatives of swelling, binding the corpse, modification of his mortal home to prevent return by the customary entrance door,⁵ etc., the burial after complete (hastened) decomposition, mutilation of the corpse, cremation, the use of pungent greenstuffs, garlic, etc. Equally exhaustive scholarship is applied to the problem of killing actual vampires—for which Saturday is the appropriate day (p. 67). Related to this is the scientific explanation for the various lights over the grave of the vampire, the worldwide ways of "killing" the vampire, and the range of movement deemed possible to it (ch. X),—much of which is that not brought about by will, as in life, but caused by such entities as microorganisms within the body (in death).

Thus it is that the forensic pathologist becomes more and more an interpreter of the reports in the later parts of the book. And it is his knowledge which enables us to see how most of this folklore is not "a simple account of experience, but is put through a series of cognitive filters" (p. 195), so that the resultant narrated event has little resemblance to reality, and so, it is shown, a process of "interpretation" builds on evidence, thus resulting in the genesis of the European vampire. Certainly various forms of the (former) self—shadow, reflection, memo-

ry—belong to the lore of the dead, and particularly to our concepts of the potentially dangerous “recent dead”. It is they who are blamed for contemporary sickness and death, thus necessitating their second death, particularly by staking, to make them powerless to afflict the living.

As Barber’s book still bears traces of its origin as a thesis⁶—notably in its very considerable “Bibliography”—so Carol Senf’s 1988 study would seem still to be very close, in both organisation and exhaustive analysis of certain books, to the series of articles (p. v) in which many of the book analyses first appeared. Somewhat surprisingly, material on the genesis of the research, which should probably have appeared as a “preface”, only occurs at the beginning of the last chapter (pp. 140–141). This is a pity, in that this section gives us the clue to subconscious rise of the literary vampire in the century before Stoker:

I initially became interested in women vampires in nineteenth-century literature because of what I perceived as hostility to women in that literature. ... This chapter is much more speculative because it looks primarily at the “whys”— ... why did a primitive superstition suddenly become a popular literary figure ... why has the vampire evolved so significantly over the past ... two centuries ... [and] why is the vampire in the twentieth century primarily a character in *popular* literature... (pp. 140–142)

The method of analysis is to begin with examples of near contemporary “vampires”—Count Chocula, of pre-sweetened breakfast cereal fame, or the avuncular Count on Sesame Street who helps children learn their numbers—and then to look at adult escapist stories where vampires are linked with sexual acts, (adult) comic books, television programmes, films, etc. and are often made more attractive than leaders and typical figures in the surrounding western society. That many of these texts are virtually unknown to scholars outside the United States does not invalidate at all this surprising analysis of contemporary legend motifs. A related point (p. 7)—and one taken up again in the last chapter—is the vampires’ frequent acts of defiance and attractive “refusal” to conform to arbitrary social standards. This leads to Senf’s challenging notion, as a feminist, that many writers over the last hundred years “use the vampire motif to explore sexual

roles and human identity" (p. 11). This is then followed by a serious study of the several types of literary vampire during the nineteenth century.

The first of these sections (Chapter Two) focuses on fictional works in which living-dead characters actually drink the blood of their human victims and all the human characters realize that vampires exist. Major texts treated here include Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1816), the serial *Varney the Vampyre* (early 1840s), "Carmilla" (1872), and Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), after a shrewd summary of the use of folklore by the German romantics, notably Ossensfelder, Burger and Goethe. Polidori's text is shown to be innovative in several ways—in its use of moonlight as restorative, in the aristocratic rank of his vampire, and in the erotic link between vampire and victim (p. 34). *Varney* is shown to develop various ideas from Polidori and act as precursor to Stoker. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's elegant novella, "Carmilla", is shown as a text with much of the ordinary rather than his usual Gothic manner and it touches on the mistreatment of large groups in society, as well as on the potential of all women to become victims. His work also marks the shift from male to female vampires about the middle of the nineteenth century. This last text is also held to have influenced Stoker in various ways, as well as *Dracula's* debts to Radcliffe's *Schedoni*, Maturin's *Melmoth* and Lewis' *Antonio*. Stoker is also shown to have used the sensation novels of the 1860s, the New Women novels of the 1890s (pp. 67ff), and melodrama.

In the second survey section Senf treats fictional works in which one of the characters suspects another of being a vampire, but:

because that suspicion is never proved conclusively, the reader is led to focus on ordinary human evil rather than on supernatural evil. Here the main concern is with Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Bram Stoker's *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909), in which Rupert Sent Leger, protagonist and chief narrator, writes in his journal about a mysterious woman whom he long suspects of vampirism, but who will finally become his wife. Bronte's Heathcliff and Catherine are equally suspect, the former being mused over by Mrs Dean as his appearance changes: "Is he a ghoul, or a vampire?" ... I had read of such hideous, incarnate demons (Chap. XXXIV).

Chapter V treats of fictional works in which one of the characters deliberately uses the term "vampire" as a significant metaphor for destructive human behaviour and this shows the writer to be very aware of the literary tradition and of the social or historical significance of the vampire motif. The main texts treated here are Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), George Elliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–2) and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852–53). In all of them, as in various polemical works using the vampire for a like social metaphor, the concern is rather the relationship of the past to the present, a clear understanding that certain groups and persons exploit others, and an authorial /interpretative concern with sexual identity. For as Senf puts it, "Myth becomes metaphor in realistic fiction".

Thus it is that her study⁷ is less concerned with folklore than (*seriatim*) with: Gothic literature, quality realistic literature which contains Gothic material, mid to later twentieth-century popular culture, and with the attractiveness of the contemporary vampire's rebelliousness. The Enlightenment's treatment of the primitive is fascinating, as is the early modern link with notions about epidemic disease, including Victorian attitudes to death. Equally interesting, if more speculative, is the notion (p. 149) that dying from vampire attack might seem attractive to moderns in the face of obliteration in nuclear warfare. More plausible is her view that today's vampire hero status (p. 150) is a measure of hostility to all authority; and the linked concept that "it is during the periods of greatest social flux that the vampire—especially the woman vampire—seems to thrive" (p. 160). Equally true is Senf's assertion that, in the present generation, the vampire has returned to being a kind of folk figure and so, rightfully again, "to its rightful place as a subject of folk interest" (p. 164).

The third of the volumes under close discussion is Brian J. Frost's astoundingly detailed survey, *The Monster with a Thousand Faces: Guises of the Vampire in Myth and Literature*, which identifies and categorizes many hundreds of potentially fugitive tales that may well only be found in the larger copy-right libraries. Further, it has an "Addendum" of more than 200 novels and short stories, from the middle of this century, which were located and identified after the writing of the main text.

These surveys of analysis and classification occupy the vast bulk of the book, but its Part One, "Guises of the Vampire: An Inventory", is important for its subsections which, after a succinct overview of the origins of the myth, treat of such themes as "undeath", "vampires of the astral plane"—particularly those spirit-vampires treated with so much respect by the Theosophists—and similar "horrors of our nightmares"⁸, psychic vampires, and animal vampires. Yet other unexpected sections treat of the real-life blood-crazed psychopaths and their criminal quest for the forbidden "red milk".

A particularly useful feature of this collection is its identification of the (more important) several editors, mainly writing in English, who have made distinctive collections of such stories this century, the style and thrust of various fugitive and even "pulp" magazines which had distinctive and highly imaginative vampire-fanciers amongst their contributors, the various related interests of scholars of the vampire and the Gothic like Peter Haining, Carl Jacobi, Bram Stoker, Alan Ryan, H.P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and so many others; and the inclusion of various gems of vampire lore as to their presence being revealed in certain kinds of photography. A modest yet helpful last sentence suggests that Frost's survey book is more than likely "to provide anthologists with plenty of ideas for further selections" (p. 124).

While many of Frost's ideas appear in another form in the other two volumes under discussion, his style is simpler, fresher and less formal. His is an engaging manner which casually drops an appetite-arousing detail like that of Malory's high-born lady "whose life is sustained by endless dishfuls of virgin's blood" (p. 36), or the decadent surrenders to the kisses of a fierce vampiress in the poems of Charles-Baudelaire (p. 43). These two passages make the point that Frost has identified for us scores of vampire(-like) passages in the writings of justly famed authors from many northern hemisphere countries. He has also made well the point that vampires may take diverse forms and appear in many different locales, indeed in any imaginable place. These challenging observations as to the modern metamorphoses of these predators lead him to his valid re-definition:

a vampire can be human or non-human, animate or inanimate, tangible or intangible, and it can dwell in a variety of places, both

here on earth and in realms beyond the material plane of everyday cognizance.... [For] a vampire is fundamentally a parasitic force or being, malevolent and self-seeking by nature, whose paramount desire is to absorb the life-force or ingest the vital fluids of a living organism in order to sate its perverse hunger and perpetuate its unnatural existence. (p. 27)

Clearly the three volumes under discussion will be followed by hundreds of others, yet they can justly claim to have one characteristic in common—they present to the late twentieth-century student of contemporary legend plausible and detailed backgrounds to, and illustrations of, the seemingly inexhaustible current interest in this field of bizarre (imagined) human predators, one whom Frost has called “an incredible multi-monster, arguably the supreme creation of the fantasy writer’s imagination” (p. 27). Indeed, one of his last survey sections, “Reference Works” (pp. 27–35)—and perhaps one of the most useful of his several encyclopedic essays—indicates the cultural place in which these two books should be placed.⁹ Certainly, marked enthusiasm for this most ubiquitous genre of horrible life-after-death and of concern for the spirits who may yet break through the fragile veil that separates their world from ours.

Notes

¹They will be referred to in this essay as Barber, Senf and Frost, with appropriate page references.

²A number of American pathologists are listed as sources and interpreters of early data in their field (p. vii).

³This detail of a seeming erection may be a misinterpretation of the bloating, with decomposition, of the sexual organs. See p. 9n for details of the scholarship on this phenomenon.

⁴Asocial lives, especially those led in the wild, followed by solitary death, were productive of vampires, as is believed in Bulgaria, amongst Gypsies, Finns, Hungarians, etc. (pp. 37–38). This last point suggests a propensity to vampire beliefs amongst the non-Indo-European peoples of “Europe”, or by Indo-Europeans of these other races/groups.

⁵Fascinatingly treated (*passim*) in the case of Glam in *Grettis saga*.

⁶Somewhat oddly, the title page does not bear the author’s name, which only appears on the cover, the address of the publisher is not given anywhere, and there is no index, an unfortunate lack. An index

is still necessary, despite the fact that notes aggregate a bulk equivalent to one fifth of the main text.

⁷The books could serve as a most helpful commentary on the 1992 (London, Creation Press) volume of texts entitled *Blood and Roses: The Vampire in 19th Century Literature*, edited by Adèle Olivia Gladwell and James Havoc.

⁸Perhaps surprisingly the famous Fergus Hume tale, *A Son of Perdition* (1912) is not included, although there is just reference to Eliphas Levi, a source for such Theosophical writings by H.P. Blavatsky as *Isis Unveiled*, and also cited by Hume in his 1912 novel.

⁹He has picked up Carol Senf's then very recent volume. See Frost, p. 133.