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# FROM THE ROMANTICS TO STOKER: CULTURE, APPEAL AND LONGEVITY OF THE MYTH

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the literary presence of the vampire figure in the works of two Romantics, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and *The Giaour* by Lord Gordon Byron by performing a contrastive analysis of the application of the undead and its specific usages in these poems. Further development of this character is examined in the most supreme representation of fin-de-siècle novel on vampirism—*Dracula* by Bram Stoker. We dwell upon the endurance of the folkloric myth and probe into the qualities that these works bestow on the character. The aim of the paper is to draw a parallel between these dissimilar works, focusing on their disparities and commonalities in order to uncover the transformation of this mythical figure into the literature and film in the 21st century.

**Key words:** *folkloric vampire, undead characters, metaphoric usage, evil, perpetuation, film*

## Introduction

The works of Lord Byron, *The Giaour*, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, rely heavily on the representation of the vampiric. Although, on surface matter, the vampiric elements serve disparate functions within the Byron and Coleridge poems, a deeper examination reveals that they intricately serve as devices which facilitate the action and enable construction of various meanings and themes. The vampiric elements of the poems contribute to the construction of characterization and greatly influence the meaning of the poetry. Although there is a separation of almost one hundred years from Coleridge and Byron's vampiric creations, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* represents a turning point in the development of this literary character, a kind of a bridge between the Romantic representations and the vampiric literature in the 20th and 21st century by setting the stage for images and devices that will become clichés in vampiric literature. As Matthew Beresford describes it, "[it] is perhaps the only occasion where all the different aspects of the vampire, from history, folklore and literature, combine" (Matthew Beresford, 2008, p. 138-9)

**Byron's *The Giaour***

In Byron the vampire is utilized to highlight difference and otherness, and the way this "other", in this case a Westerner in an Oriental setting, can become a victim of circumstances. Byron is mainly preoccupied with exploration of strong emotions —love, hate and revenge, which are depicted to determine and seal the fate of the main character into eternal state of agony, parallel to the perpetual existence of the vampire in a liminal space between life and death; coming of and going back to the grave; being undead among the dead, and not alive among the living. So is the Giaour unfit to live in the Eastern society, but then not part of the Western either, as if he were in Hassan's position, he would have done the same act of violence. He is living, but exists like a vampire among humans. Death is an unnegotiable status, which like life is granted to us, not upon our wish, but upon some divine powers. The vampire depicted in this character serves as a metaphor for representation of human existence troubled with eternal suffering because of wrong perception. Although it is one of the first Romantic representations of the vampiric, it is more than a mere perpetuation of the folkloric vampire. Byron bestows his vampire the melancholic quality, which would open the path to a new line of vampires, molded partly on Byron's own persona. The love and guilt themes, which accompanied the folkloric vampire, perpetuate in the poem, as Byron's Giaour operates through desire and destruction, which lead him from emotions of ecstasy to anguish. Like the Mariner and their predecessors from superstition, he is a transgressor whose passionate nature and diabolical narcissism take him to self-exile. This character enables Byron to explore the darkness in the human soul and the suffering that is a result of flawed perception of love. The Giaour is in a sense very modern, as he pre-exists the emergence of the modern vampire, a creature who is endowed with feelings questioning his existence and engulfed with the desire to end his eternal life as it is not a blessing. The Giaour is destined that he should "ghastly haunt [his] native place / And suck the blood of all [his] race" (lines 757–8). Byron's vampire is cursed with "a fire unquench'd, unquenchable" (line 751) so that the tortures of his inward hell "Nor ear can hear, nor tongue can tell" (lines 753). The hell he lives is the "banquet which perforce / Must feed [the Giaour's] livid living corse" (lines 761–2). Previously, the demonic suffering of the liminal existence of the vampire, next to the living but still isolated, was not of literary interest, and its destruction was to be dealt harshly. Byron's vampire is both victimizer, because of a wrong kind of love, and victim of the circumstances he lives in. *The Giaour*, set in Oriental iconography, directs the genre towards a new course—of the ancestral curse, while retaining the characteristics of folklore. Further than this, Byron was probably not concerned to pursue the vampire story. However, Byron is undeniably crucial to the evolution of the literary vampire. In this respect, it is inevitable to note his contribution to the shift from the depiction of the vampire as village blood-drinking revenant to representations of the vampire as an alluring narcissistic Byronic Hero. As the later literary expressions of the Byronic vampire were unquestionably fashioned as a product of Byron's *The Giaour* and the infamy that spread from Byromania.

### Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Coleridge's representation of the Ancient Mariner, following the stream of the folkloric vampire, is based on an act of transgression, as is the case with Byron's vampire. Although the poem parallels the Christian theme of sin-punishment-redemption, it does not support the religious interpretation entirely. Coleridge seems to be speculating on the existence of inexplicable evil powers, which can be, unleashed by merely a minor deed, rather than on the existence of a benevolent all-loving God. The alluring deadly Life-in-Death female initiates a vampiric transformation in the Mariner, which grants him eternal life, but also endless suffering. The two basic emotions enacted in the poem, like in *The Giaour*, are love-towards all beings that is the absence of it, and guilt. The poem, although claimed to be robbed of moral, does contain one, which is eventually not the unevidenced connection between the Mariner's sin and the outweighed punishment, but is rather the prophetic warning against violation of nature-Coleridge's proto-modern ecological criticism. He artistically warns against committing crimes against nature, as merely a minor harm can bring devastating consequences like the death of the two hundred men on the ship and the never-ending suffering of the Mariner. The role of the vampiric representation of the Mariner is to depict the suffering of a soul who is void of divine love towards every living creature in the world, and to warn that the world is often governed by invisible and irrational forces which may bring about great consequences for committing only a minor act. The vampiric appears as merely a means Coleridge applied to accomplish his artistic and prophetic purposes. The Mariner's vampiric attributes operate as a device that moves the events in the narrative and enables the perpetuation of the Mariner's story, which in its cyclic repetitive character becomes endless like The *Rime* itself, a perpetually captivating story.

### Stoker's *Dracula*

Dracula, on the other hand, the main vampire figure in Stoker's novel is an arrogant, aristocratic gentleman with a desire to control; he does not suffer like the vampiric characters in the Romantics' poems, but brings about suffering to others. The reason for his vampiric origins is never revealed, and there is no evidence of any transgression on his part, which could have instilled the evil and the connection to the diabolic in him. The entire narrative is constructed on the two opposite forces-Good and Evil, with the vampires representing the latter, and the humans representing pure goodness. The vampire is driven by deep emotions but those are neither love, nor guilt, but a desire for power and for life itself. He nourishes his desire with the blood from humans, that is, their lives. As a result, they are killed or fall completely under his control, destroyed or infected. For those who turn into vampires, life is simultaneously prolonged in a state of eternal life-in-death, which parodies the Christian promise of afterlife through the grace of God, and grants this vampire the position of God. The feelings of love and guilt in the novel are generally reserved for the female characters, who feel pure platonic love for the men in their lives, and guilt when they were infected with vampirism. The vampires are the only

sexualized characters in the novel, unlike Byron's and Coleridge's undead figures who are robbed of any erotic side or implicit sexuality. The vampires in Stoker are seductive and highly eroticized, but their sexuality has been presented implicitly and there is no evidence of direct sexual act. Nevertheless, their inferred sexuality arouses ideas of perverted, unconventional sex, which does not lead toward procreation, but the destruction of life, marriage and moral norms. The vampires' unrestrained desire, reminiscent of the Giaour's passionate nature, enveloped in Christian context, could be a way of the author to point to the destructive nature of love if based merely upon sensuality and pleasure. However, there is a chance that Stoker was also pointing to the contemporary anxieties about non-procreational sex, homosexuality and the role of the female as a mother and a sexual agent capable of fulfilling men's deepest desires. As Fin-de-siècle England was characterized by the beginning of the break-down of the governing laws of sexual identity and behavior as Elaine Showalter (1982) has shown, the patriarchal English legal system referring marriage started to break with the introduction to laws such in The Married Woman's Property Act (1882) which gave women more independence and reciprocal rights and duties with their husbands. This is also the time when the words "feminism" and "homosexual" came into use. During this period, affected by the New Woman Movement Victorian novelists introduced female characters, which were spouseless mothers like Thomas Hardy's Tess, or Nathaniel Hawthorne's single mother Hester. These literary developments were taken in the society as unnatural and perverted, as states, which are turned upside down. *Dracula* continues to operate on this perversion of the natural order, from the Count's androgynous look in his castle, with his luscious mouth and protruding teeth as a blend of feminine and masculine traits, to his representation as "the father and furtherer of new order of beings, whose road must lead through Death, not Life" (p. 251). This undermines not only Victorian rationalism, but also the whole Judeo-Christian belief in one Creator-God. With the success of the good vampire hunters in destroying the evil, disease-bringing Count Dracula, Stoker, however, implies that it is still possible to retain cultural coherence against Dracula's perversion. Stoker's irony at the end of the novel is introduced by the unreliability of the story, as it all turns out to be a subjective interpretation, rather than experiences of a group of people fighting against the evil threat as objective facts. This can definitely not be ascribed to Stoker's oversight, but the author's investment in paradox and ambiguity of a modern novel.

Regardless of whether the representation of social criticism is Stoker's or the novel's attitude towards gender and sexual roles, homosexuality or social change, *Dracula* has remained what it has been for more than a century. Although this novel was a pivotal narrative for the modern vampire myth, it was actually television, cinema and the theatre utilization of the creature that eventually produced the shift towards the current idea of the vampire.

## The Longevity of the Myth

In order to have a glimpse of the development of the vampiric in the centuries that followed, I am tracing some of the most prominent representations in films and fiction. This is, however, not an extensive analysis of the cinematic and literary growth of the vampiric figure, but an attempt to pinpoint the productions that have perpetuated the myth and have created a significant transformation of this character, thus leading to the vampire of the 21st century. F.W. Murnau's silent film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), is the first film that features the vampire figure, and it is specifically Stoker's vampire that the film utilizes as a basis for the main character and the plot. This German Expressionist horror film features the memorable Count Orlok instead of Count Dracula, with his pointed ears, hooked nose, rat-like teeth and thin shadowy body appearing at the doorway of Mina's bedroom. *Nosferatu* served as an allegory of contemporary German history, as it presented a typical German town under a foreign threat-the vampire and the bubonic plague that he brings with him. This easily fits in the context of Weimar Germany in the 1920s and its devastating economic and political effects. The film was soon hunted in many countries where it was shown and destroyed because of authorship rights which Stoker's wife claimed after his death. Fortunately, a few copies have survived which give us insight into the very first big screen adaptation of Stoker's theme.

Sydney Horler's *The Vampire* (1935) was the first classic vampire novel after Stoker, but it did not leave a particular impression, as it saw Stoker's novel inspiring and instigating a series of popular American vampiric pulp magazines, which, although not of any literary quality, entertained millions of readers. In the 1930s and 40s, the vampiric theme mainly inhabited the science fiction genre, such as Eric Frank Russell's novella *Sinister Barriers* (1939) and A.E. Van Vogt's *Asylum* (1942) where vampires are portrayed as a phase of human evolution. When the copyright on *Dracula* expired in 1968, there was a surge of novels on Count Dracula. *The Adult Version of Dracula* (1970) by Ed Wood represented an open pornographic representation of Stoker's novel and traced the path of a series of erotic representations of vampires. In 1975 Stephen King published *Salem's Lot*, which places the vampire in a small town in modern day America with a lot of deaths, and dead babies coming back to life with the need to be fed on more than milk. The image is an inversion of the babies in Stoker that the vampire women and Lucy feed on. The film could be read as a metaphor of the evil lurking around us and waiting to be unleashed, but also as a representation of social issues, such as perverted motherhood (the women beating their babies to death), men drinking too much and raping their wives. Anne Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), the beginning of the series *The Vampire Chronicles*, presents a story of two vampires, Louis and Lestat, who create a 'vampire family' when they turn Claudia, an orphaned child, into a vampire. The story is noticeably different from the other vampire narratives, and is a gloomy, unsettling and soul-searching novel, which after *Dracula* has deserved the credit of bringing the vampire into the age of modernity. It is significant for developing the personality of the vampire as a creature who is trying to make a meaning of its cursed undead existence; a theme previously partially addressed in *Varney the Vampire* and *The Giaour.* As *Dracula* directed

the course of the vampire's growth from its mythological form into new forms, so did *Interview with the Vampire* bridge the gap between the first modern vampiric representation and its contemporary forms. After being brought into existence in the pioneering novels of Anne Rice and Stephen King, the vampire was re-invented on the big screen again, remarkably in Joel Schumacher's *The Lost Boys*, released in 1987, a story of a teenager who falls in with a gang of vampire punks where he meets Star, the only girl of the group, who is a form of psychic vampire. The cinematic vampire was based on the common vampire myth, but it featured the creation of vampires through the consumption of vampiric blood, rather than the more traditional way of a vampiric bite on the neck present in earlier films. The 1990s brought a change in the production of the vampiric. Kim Newman published *Anno Dracula (1992) and The Bloody Red Baron (1995).* The first one is an alternate-reality of *Dracula*, where the vampire hunters are defeated, and Dracula has become the prince consort of Queen Victoria. Prince Dracula in the novel has diverted from the homoeroticism of Stoker's Dracula, towards a homophobic attitude. The novel also directly addresses female sexuality, which was in Stoker only subtly represented. *The Bloody Red Dragon* features another alternate history theme, with Dracula having defeated the Kaiser in WWI has created a squadron of shape-changing flying vampires who attack from the sky. The arrival of the movie *Blade* (1998) meant the departure of the original settings and attributes of the vampires: the film features no castles, no graveyards, no rising from the grave, not even sleeping in coffins. The new vampire is highly advanced, lustrous cyber-vamp who exists on the boundaries of reality. Blade is still a creature of the night, hidden away from humanity, but his enemies are no longer stake-wielding professors. Modern vampire films at the end of the twentieth century tend to be no longer about metaphorical meanings or psychological analysis, but rather about death, blood, and horror, more of a primeval return to the vampire's origins but placed in a modern sci-fi setting.

Today the vampire does not produce fear as they used to. More than a hundred years after *Dracula,* the vampire has transformed into something like a star. Modern technology and mass-market productions have eliminated its mysterious nature and transformed it into a supermarket product, such as breakfast cereals, children's television, or a tourist topic. The development of the vampire in the twenty-first century has been expressed specifically through films, turning the vampire into a mass culture product. Bridging the cultural gap and social need between the previous and this century, Jules Zanger attributes the following traits to the modern concept of vampire:

With the loss of vampires' metaphysical and religious status, there is a parallel loss of many of their folkloric attributes. Though still possessing preternatural strength and shunning the light, most contemporary vampires have lost their mutability, which is the essence of all magic. They can no longer transform themselves into bats or mist or wolves or puffs of smoke; in addition, they need no longer wait to be invited over a threshold, and mirrors and crucifixes appear to have relatively little effect on them.

(Zanger, 1997, p.19)

Vampire theme adaptations in films, plays and series have moderated the vampire, and have in turn influenced fiction. The vampires' basic attribute of evilness and connection to the diabolic has gradually diminished, and "The vampire's powers are sometimes seen not as a threat but as an asset, without worry about whether those powers come from the devil" (Guiley, p. 10). Count Dracula was an incarnation of evil, whereas today the vampire figure in fiction has been recorded in seven distinguished types: a) the relentlessly evil, b) the victim, c) the romantic figure, d) the do-gooder, e) the empathetic alien, f) the love interest g) the eccentric minority (Guiley, p. 10-11). Many novels, as well as films, conflate these characteristics into a single character. For instance, Edward Cullen from Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2015) can be described as a victim of his vampirism, it's something he does not enjoy. He is also a romantic figure who is simultaneously attractive and philosophical, he is an empathetic altruist who is part of a minority group that shows compassion for humans. He is deeply in the love with Bella Swan. Moreover, lastly, the entire Cullen family is a weird minority, representing "the family next door" (Guiley, p. 10-11; Meyer). Meyer's *Twilight* depicts the vampire figure not only to utilize the creature's popularity for producing an interesting novel, which was subsequently produced into the film series *Twilight Saga (2008)*, but also as means of social commentary.

There are various opinions as to the number of films with vampires that have been produced. Brown (2002) enumerates around 1 000 titles. And, Guiley (2005) concludes that the only fictional character that has surpassed it in film representations is Sherlock Holmes. Whereas, according to Gelder (1994) around 3 000 films related to vampire topics have been released so far. What is more than evident is the fact that they assert more differences than similarities that they consciously draw upon. The vampire figure has perpetuated and existed "next to" humans, as part of their culture from ancient times. It has survived and transited from mythology to literature, and with the advancement of technology from literature to films and the cyberspace. What keeps its appeal is probably humans' fascination with its erotic side and the concept of eternal life as a way to defeat the immanence of death. The Romantics that have utilized the vampire in their works elaborated here, were drawn to this supernatural figure as they found in it prolific means to explore the nature of human feelings and the effects of these on the living beings that surround them, as well as the influence of the unseen forces on human life and experiences. It enabled them to explore fallen human condition as a result of flawed perception of love and lack of appreciation for life and nature. Stoker was concerned with evil that could be either internal or external threat, and employed the vampire theme to discuss contemporary social anxieties.

**Conclusion**

With the amounts of material hoarded throughout the centuries on these undead figures, there are no two writers who similarly accessed these mythical figures. The general widespread of the vampire theme suggests that vampire narratives can occur in any place and at any time. The background variations, and the specific elements as well, but what underlies them all is that there is always blood. Ultimately, it is indisputable: vampires are a part of the culture. Adams (*By Blood We Live*) suggests,

"Perhaps the myth of the vampire comes from a little bit of projection on the part of the living. We have a hard time imagining our existence after death, and it may be easier to imagine a life that goes on somehow" (2009, p. 1). Waller concurs that the undead should be comprehended in the context of the living (*The Living and the Undead*, 1986). Therefore, we find vampires attractive and have been captivated by them because they were once human; we recognize us in them: "Whatever their physical appearance, their special powers and unnatural appetites, or their particular sort of immortality, the undead betray their origins and remain recognizably, disturbingly human." (Waller, 1986, p. 16) Vampires represent the monstrous other within ourselves or the fear from an outward other. Therefore, vampires continue to enjoy perpetual popularity as the audiences identify the imperfections and advantages of humanity.

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