

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ „ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ“ - ШТИП
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

UDC80 (82)

ISSN 1857-7059

ГОДИШЕН ЗБОРНИК

2023

YEARBOOK

2023



ГОДИНА 14
БРОЈ 22

VOLUME 14
NO 22

GOCE DELCEV UNIVERSITY - STIP
FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

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GOCE DELCEV UNIVERSITY – STIP
FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY



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Филолошки факултет
ул. „Крсте Мисирков“ 10-А п. факс 201, 2000 Штип
Република Северна Македонија



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HUMAN APPEAL TO HORROR: WHEN EASTERN LEGENDS AND WESTERN GOTHIC MEET

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Abstract: This paper focuses on human appeal to horror in literature and traces the link between the old legends and myths from Eastern and Central Europe and Gothic literature leading to creatures that invoke apprehension and terror in Romantic writings. We begin by examining horror elements in some of the initial proto-vampires to be encountered in European folklore and analyse several eastern legends with the purpose of depicting and defining their specific features. This paper also aims at probing into the psychological and social issues that incite human want for horror stories. The cultural theory of the emerging of horror in literature will be presented and discussed as well as what the horror that the vampire represents stands for.

Key words: *horror, Eastern and Central European legends, undead, social anxiety, psychological reasons.*

Introduction

Devendra Varma, in *The Vampire in Legend, Lore and Literature* (1970), explains that the folkloric vampire evoking horror and fear is a difficult creature to understand and interpret. According to various folkloric perceptions of what vampires are, similar creatures have existed, in varying forms and nature, around the world. J. Gordon Melton (*The Vampire Book: Encyclopaedia of the Undead*, 1994) locates original documenting of vampires in an Assyrian poem, which represents evil spirits who “are demons full of violence, ceaselessly devouring blood”. It is worth to note that the bloodsucking characteristic is not synonymous with vampires and not consistent with all the vampires from folklore, particularly in East and Central

European legends. However, it will become one of the characteristics often attributed to the modern literary vampire, particularly the ones following Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Varma also narrates tales from Egypt, Greece, and India with creatures that come back from the dead and drink human blood. Many cultures in the world have produced similar stories. Despite its universal existence, it is essential to note that the fact as what defines vampires has remained ambiguous. Varma recounts vampiric gods from ancient mythologies, and assumes that as myths live by the power of the spoken word, hence travel to foreign lands, where they mix with the native gods, this blend of ancient vampire-gods and new gods becomes part of superstition and folklore in the new cultures. He defines the vampire from the original myth as "an anthropomorphic theme, a human-animal, life—death configuration. The vampire kills and re-creates. He is the Destroyer and the Preserver, for the passive vampires of life turn into active ones after death" (Varma, 1970, p. xiv). The purpose of these ancient myths, as Varma observes, was "to strike terror - an emotion which, for a brief spell, thrusts an individual beyond the self." (Varma, 1970, p. xiv)

Human Appeal to Horror

Gothic horror is a period in English literature that started with the first Gothic novel by Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, and lasted until the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it reached its greatest popularity during the Romantic period in England, between 1780s and 1824. Carter agrees with Cawelti when she asserts that the combination of fantastical events with romance in the Gothic enables us to "confront and exorcise our emotions concerning the mysteries of existence" (1986, p.122). This was a period when readers were attempting to understand the relationship between the two worlds—the spiritual and the new scientific one. Supernatural elements provided them support, according to Carter, because "the problems faced by the characters' touch, however obliquely, upon problems faced by their readers" (Carter, 1986, p. 3). Rosemary Jackson, in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, states "The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (1986, p. 3). Fantasy realizes a desire or dismisses it "when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity" (Jackson, 1986, p. 3- 4). Finally, fantastic literature enables the reader "to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden in a carefully controlled way" (Cawelti, 1976, p. 35) because "it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside of the law, that which is outside of the dominant value systems" (Jackson, 1986, p. 4). Therefore, the study of literary vampires can start from the mid to late eighteenth century, as this is the time when Western society started to change and transform due to industrialization. From the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, the imaginations produced within a new capitalist society often show some

of the devastating psychological effects of living in a materialistic culture and losing the ground of the spiritual world. The new era produced anxieties, and horror as well as the vampire figure found its place in literature easily to convey these anxieties.

Noel Carroll (*The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, 1990) sheds a light on the human appeal to horror in literature and focuses on the cultural moments when horror thrived in literary texts. He asserts that horror tends to ensue in times of social anxiety. He exemplifies this phenomenon in vampire films such as *Nosferatu* by F. W. Murnau, which appeared in 1922 during the Weimar Republic in Germany; and also points to the Great Depression in the United States when “the Universal classics of horror” appeared. He contends, “the horror genre is capable of incorporating or assimilating general social anxieties into its iconography of fear and distress” (p. 207). This cultural theory of the emerging of horror in literature can be applied to the vampire theme in literature in the eighteenth century. As it will be presented here, the folkloric vampire emerged in the areas of armed conflict between the two major empires, the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, in Eastern and Central Europe and reached Western poets and philosophers in the official records of governmental officials and clergy. The vampire figure was assimilated by poets, initially in German ballads, as a metaphor of human nature. The origin of this creature in the East is also aligned with the pre-Romantic appeal to exoticism and the allure of the foreign. As Byron instructed Thomas Moore to turn to the exotic as a source: “Stick to the East; - the oracle, Staël, told me it was the only poetical policy.” (*Byron's Letters and Journals*, 1974)

The first entry of the word vampire in the Oxford English Dictionary dates from 1734 and describes these revenants as “evil spirits who animate the bodies of deceased persons” (as cited in Auerbach, 1995, p. 20). According to Katharina M. Wilson, there are several theories about the origins of the word vampire. One of the most accepted is that it originates from the Slavic words *upir*, *uper* and *upyr*, which are derived from the Turkish word *uber*, meaning “witch” (*The History of the Word Vampire*, 1998, pp. 3-9).

Another theory traces it from the Serbian *bamiiup*, borrowed from the Bulgarian via Greek language. The journey from folklore to literature started when Austrian troops in the areas in Eastern Europe were witnesses of unusual events of superstitious peasants exhuming corpses, sometimes cutting their heads off and often staking them through the heart to make sure that the body will never leave the grave. Soon this region was suffering a vampire panic. These stories from East and Central European countries were spread by the Austrian occupying forces, mainly in the Habsburg Empire, so German poets, philosophers and scientists quickly learnt about this creature. In 1716, the Turks had declared war on the Habsburgs. The war ended with the defeat of the Ottomans, and the Austrian army conquered northern Serbia and Wallachia (Mamatey, 1978, p. 96-97). The occupying Austrian armies who were stationed in these areas made official records of unusual local practices of digging the

dead body out in order to keep it from turning into vampire (Barber, 2010, p. 5). These reports instigated debates among Western European scientists and philosophers on the likelihood of the existence of vampires in reality. Among them was Dom Augustin Calmet, whose work “A Dissertation Concerning Vampires, or the Spectres Which Appear in Hungary, Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia” (1746) invites for searching for rational explanations and scientific proof for the vampire phenomena.

Despite the fact that the Enlightenment had attempted to give rational explanations for the vampire stories supported by scientific evidence, such as the various types of soil and their effect on decomposition, and the biological processes that occur during decomposition, the origins of the belief in vampirism was not sufficiently explained. In 1764, Voltaire wrote his satirical essay “Vampires” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, where he applies the metaphor of vampire to explain the function of monks and politicians in society, and especially business people who suck the blood of the common people. He asserts: “We never speak of vampires in London, nor even at Paris. I confess, that in both these cities there were stock-jabbers, brokers, and men of business, who sucked the blood of the people in broad day-light; but they were not dead, though corrupted. These true suckers lived not in cemeteries, but in very agreeable palaces.” (1824, p. 305)

For Voltaire vampires served only as tools for metaphorical representation of current political issues, but he also considered them to be merely part of mockable superstition just as he felt organized religion to be. Despite the fact that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers and theologians were rejecting the idea of vampires, the European reading audience, as Christopher Frayling states, was becoming fed up with Enlightenment rationalism and wanted something different. In the period preceding the French Revolution, Rousseau’s ideas lead some believers into mesmerism, spiritualism and animal magnetism. As part of a wider interest into the occult and the exotic, in certain circles in Paris vampirology had become very fashionable. The Age of Reason brought about the Revolution. The period of tumult during and after it restored the vampire figure which allowed people the required getaway, as supernatural beliefs had always offered a way to comprehend the mysteries and mischiefs of life.

Eastern Legends

In this paper, several officially recorded stories about vampires will be shortly presented in order to trace the route of this creature from folklore and legends of Eastern Europe to the literature of the Western world and notice the folkloric characteristics of this figure. Some of the most well-known vampire stories are: the story of Peter Plogojowitz from Serbia, the Greek tale of vroukolakas, “The Shoemaker from Silesia” and a Romanian tale about a vampire princess.

Tournefort's account "A Voyage to the Levant" (1702) presents his actual witnessing of exhumation of the body of a person who was suspected to be a *vroucolacas*, the Greek term for vampire, derived from Slavic and used to refer to a werewolf. The link with the Slavic word is based on the Slavic belief that upon death the werewolf comes back as "the living dead," that is, a vampire (Bunson, 2000, pp. 275- 276). The French botanist is credited for having recorded the story of the Greek *vroukolakas* on the island of Mykonos. The tale is about a peasant who had died in a field under obscure circumstances. A few days afterwards, people claimed to have seen him wander the streets, allegedly, he "came into houses and turned over furniture, extinguished lamps, embraced people from behind, and played a thousand little roguish tricks." (Barber, 2010, p.21) This stirred the interest of the local clergy and officials to explore the matter of the undead person. When the body was exhumed and a mass was read, the local butcher had the task to cut and examine the body. As some of the observers of the 'vampiric autopsy' stated that the blood of the dead man was quite red, and the butcher claimed that the body was still warm, "they concluded that the deceased had the severe defect of not being quite dead, or, to state it better, of letting himself be reanimated by the devil, for that is exactly the idea they have of a *vrykolakas*" (Barber, 2010, p. 22). What is particularly noticeable here is the pseudoscience that they were using to determine vampirism, and the initial trait of the vampire figure as someone who has struck a pact with the devil, the satanic side of this creature that is going to perpetuate in the literary form. Tournefort's report was written in a humorous style, judging by the way he described the process of dissection as unscientific and his disdainful ending comments "And after that, is it not necessary to point out that the Greeks of today are not the great Greeks, and that there is among them only ignorance and superstition"(as cited in Barber, 2010, p. 24). The report itself, in fact, serves more to prove how credulous and backwards these people were than to establish the existence of a vampire. Based on this report, Barber sums up three qualities of the Greek folkloric vampires: first, when alive, this person had a disagreeable disposition, he was "naturally sullen and quarrelsome" (*Vampires. Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality*, 2010, p. 21). Second, his death was suspicious, that is, he might have died as a crime victim. Third, he never sucks the blood of his victims or causes someone's death.

The case of Peter Plogojowitz happened in the northern part of Serbia, in the village of Kisilova. It was reported that after his death, he had been buried for ten weeks when nine people from the village died and claimed on their deathbed that he had come to choke them in their sleep. As this phenomenon already existed in their folktales and legends, the peasants suspected that this person had become a vampire. Being familiar with the fact that the body of the dead person turned into a vampire shows specific signs, such as hair and nail growth and lack of body decomposition, the villagers decided to exhume the body. According to the Imperial provisor of the

district, the body of the supposed vampire had not started to decompose; there was no bad odour and the skin even looked fresher. There were signs of blood on his mouth, which was believed to be a result of the blood sucking he had performed on the other people of the village. Then the people pierced a stake into the dead body's heart and burned him to ashes (Barber, 2010, pp.6-7). The whole event was later published by the German theologian Michael Ranft in his book *De Masticatione Mortuorum* (1728). This revenant, unlike the Greek one, has the blood-sucking characteristic, which has permeated as a classic feature of vampires. The Serbian revenant is not characterized with ill nature when he was alive. However, the feature that both revenants share is the absence of bad odour, which usually accompanies the dead body because of decomposition. Ranft looks for a scientific explanation for the undecayed buried bodies in the composition of different types of soil as well as some chemical processes that occur (Bunson, 2000, p.219). This argument is further developed in Barber's *Vampires, Burial and Death: Folklore and Reality* (2010). In fact, when the Orthodox and Catholic Church split in 1054, one of the basic points they differed was about the decay of the body. The Orthodox, which generally covered the area of Eastern Europe, claimed that if the body did not decay after death, it was the case of a vampire. Whereas, the Catholic Church stated that only saints remained undecayed and even emitted pleasant odour. This could be one of the reasons that the vampire superstition was mostly prevalent in the areas of the Orthodox Church as it evidently nurtured vampire stories by the fact that it recognized the superstitious belief (Melton, 1994, p. 101). The first treatise that treats the vampire from the point of view of both churches "Graecorum Hodie Quorundam opinionibus", the Orthodox and Catholic, was written by Leo Allatius in 1645 (Hartnup, 2004, p. 370). He was a Roman Catholic but as he was also Greek (the geographical area typically Orthodox), he was familiar with both religions. The treatise presented the belief that vampires existed and were the work of the devil.

Another vampire story is "The Shoemaker from Silesia", which, according to Barber (2010), is significant as it represents a story in which the person dies prematurely and the reason is suicide, which is an act considered religiously unredeemable. The story is taken from a collection of Prussian folk stories by Grässe. It is about a shoemaker who commits suicide and his wife covers the fact by saying that he died of a stroke. One of the reasons was to avoid the shame that the family would suffer, and to make sure her husband has a proper Christian burial, as burial rites differed for those who have committed suicide or have been killed. This revenant allegedly appeared in a ghost form, scared people in the village and made terrible noise. The ghost-like form is what distinguishes this revenant from the other east European stories and it might be an argument against its vampiric value. However, as people considered the person to have become a vampire, the story just proves how fluid and diverse the folkloric vampire is.

In his worldwide collection of folktales on vampires, *A Clutch of Vampires* (1974), McNally has recorded a Romanian tale about a young girl, the daughter of the emperor, who died from a broken heart because her father sent away the soldier whom she is in love with. After her death, she comes from the grave every night and eats the soldiers who are commissioned to guard the tomb. This continues until a soldier, whom the princess used to know, is to guard her tomb. He is advised by an old woman to hide himself in three different places in the church in order to stay alive. The third night, he hides in her grave when she leaves it as a vampire. When she comes back and sees him in the grave, the curse is broken and she turns alive again. The Romanian vampire tale is important as it features the first female vampire—a young woman, in contrast to the above stories of Plogojowitz, the Mykonos vroukolakas and the “Shoemaker from Silesia”. It has been discussed here because it portrays the folkloric superstition that when someone passes away and leaves an unsettled problem or a loved one, the dead person is cursed to become undead and ramble restlessly until the curse is broken. In this case, it is the soldier’s love and his ingenuity that broke the curse. This is a theme that will be extensively implored by Burger in “Lenore” and Goethe in “The Bride of Corinth”. The other vampire stories merely report stories that supposedly happened, whereas the Romanian tale possesses a more fairy-tale quality of a story about a princess who is saved by love.

In most of these folklore stories, the place where the vampire is found and identified to be a vampire is the grave, which points to the fact that no vampire has ever been caught walking around—the ‘undead’ are always conveniently in their graves. In cases when vampires were determined, the exhumation revealed that the body had not decomposed; it even looked fresher because of the gases produced by certain microorganisms in the dead bodies. However, people were not familiar with the scientific explanation of decomposition and the effects of different types of soil, so they attributed the swelling to that fact that the suspected vampire has grown fat because of the blood he has been drinking. Vampires in most folklore stories share some characteristics: a swollen body, healthy complexion, very often the dead person’s hair and nail growth was taken as a sign; as well as blood on the mouth or in the coffin; unlike the literary representations of vampires as haggard creatures with pale complexion.

The folkloric stories show apparent disparity in the characterization of the vampire with reference to the reasons why the person turned into the “undead”, as well as in the ways of “killing” the supposed vampire. As previously discussed, the vampire legend has offered various explanations of how people become vampires. The two basic beliefs were that either one was born a vampire, or one turned into a vampire because of a transgression, usually some form of desecration. For example, those who become vampires by a hereditary family characteristic could be born on an unlucky day, presented in the old Greek belief that those born on Christmas Day turn

into vampires as penance for their mother's disobedience of bearing a child on the same day as the Virgin Mary (Jones, 1951, p. 115). These sinless vampires are almost of no interest to the literary vampire tradition, as transgressors who have committed some sinful deeds would generally excite the fantasy of many poets and novelists, making the vampire a familiar and famous figure.

Ernest Jones gives the three main reasons for the vampires' haunting only their families according to folklore: the undead person returns to punish his family, to protect the family, or he wants the family to reunite by joining him in his fate (1951, pp. 99- 100). One of the ways to explain the psychological basis of the creation of vampire stories is the need of the family member to express feeling of guilt in their dreams, as Ernest Jones proposes in his psychoanalytical interpretation of the vampire figure (1951, p. 102). The death of a family member is also a reminder of people's own mortality. Dreams of the dead, therefore, may be a manifestation of the dreamer's fear of death, and a person who has dream experiences with vampires may be a sign of guilt over still being alive while a loved one has died (Jones, 1951, p. 113).

Although it is almost impossible accurately to pin down the main characteristics of vampires from folklore, it is evident that the folkloric vampire is commonly represented as a male revenant, who is often but not exclusively, bloodthirsty and has come from the "undead" to resolve an unsettled issue or bring death. The Romanian princess does not conform to this frame as she shows more atrocious qualities, but it appears to be an isolated case.

The vampire from legends is never presented as directly drinking blood. This belief originates from observations of blood at the mouth of the alleged vampire by peasants who exhumed the body to check for signs of vampirism. Furthermore, his common appearance and behaviour differed in the various countries where the tales originated (Barber, 2010, p. 115). Another characteristic of the ambiguous nature of the folkloric vampire is its often ghost-like quality, which draws the victim's vitality. Such a ghost-like characteristic is evident in the tale of Peter Plogojowitz. Montague Summers (1991) explains the distinction between the vampire and the ghost. Whereas, the ghost returns from the dead as an incorporeal spirit, the vampire is immediately recognized by the people he is preying on, usually his family, as the reanimated body of the recently deceased loved one, rather than his spirit. He also defines demons, as vampiric actions often have a demonic trait, stating that the demon takes possession of another body, not his own, unlike the vampire who always returns from the dead in his own body.

The definition of the vampire of folklore is a problematic question, however, for the sake of the further analysis of vampiric characteristics in literature, it seems necessary to set down a benchmark which will be used to evaluate what is vampiric or not. A justifiable definition of the vampiric would be a creature with some of these characteristics:

- He (or less commonly she) has died but has returned from the grave.
- The vampire is corporeal and looks fresh as if still alive.
- He represents extreme danger, but is generally not bloodthirsty in the literal sense.
- There are three main reasons for the vampire's return as an undead: first, either there is an unsettled issue like love or revenge; or second, a crime he committed in life or is himself a victim of crime; and third, the person has been cursed.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has only been the purpose to ascertain the origins of the literary vampire in Eastern and Central European folklore as a figure that brings horror. From what has been discussed, it is evident that in folklore the purpose for the horror story is to inform of unusual deaths and to give an account of the results after death of criminal behaviour in life. However, it can also be described as a tendency of traditional societies to invent stories about the dead to explain or at least to understand something that is a terrifying reality. The image of the vampire from folklore varies, as will the image of the literary vampire become a diverse and complex creature.

From the vampire's inception in human imagination, it has primarily served to provoke apprehension and horror. Despite this trait, there is an evident attraction to the vampire, which is often ascribed to the allure of the forbidden, such as the wish to continue life after death: the appeal to eternal life. The Faustian element is a vital part of vampires, the fact that they offer what is impossible but desirable for humans—immortality, often accompanied by youth, beauty, and sexual pleasure in some cases. These traits as part of the vampiric are granted at the cost of damnation and association with the diabolic.

The horror that the vampire represents often stands for the taboo realms of the body and the instincts. According to Gilmore, "societies have pressure points or 'nodes of affliction,' where internal contradictions and conflicts abound" (Gilmore, 2003, p. 20). These are the points that produce the monsters, which during the Victorian age incited a fear of strangers, the "other", and fear of the senses that human body possesses. Gilmore observes that monsters as figments of our imagination reveal a lot in the process of interpreting fears from a psychological perspective. He asserts, "Imaginary monsters embody a variety of inner states, many sharply contradictory. One of these states stems from fear, a fear not only of the dangerous external world, but of the self." (Gilmore, 2003, p. 193) It is the combination of its folkloric elements with Gothic horror, initially ballads, which produced the literary vampire that we have in literature and films nowadays .

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