From Folklore to Fiction: Early Literary Manifestations of the Vampire Motif

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ABSTRACT Starting with the first mention of the term 'vampire' in the 11th century, this paper will follow the development of the vampire concept from Slavic folklore to the canonisation of the literary vampire motif with Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*. For this purpose, the key elements of the theme, such as supernatural strengths and weaknesses, will be analysed in the first literary manifestations of the lore, starting with Byron's 1816 *A Fragment of a Novel* and Polidori's 1819 *The Vampyre*, continuing with *Varney the Vampire* by an unidentified author, Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Hare's *The Vampire of Croglin Hall*, and ending with Stoker's *Dracula*. The key elements will then be contrasted with their equivalents from the folkloric vampire myth, revealing significant differences. Literary vampires evolved from the mute and mindless corpses of Slavic villagers to cunning aristocrats with a sinister agenda, who prefer to drain the blood of beautiful young girls instead of randomly killing their fellow villagers. These changes can be attributed to the scapegoat quality inherent to the vampire motif: from the height of the vampire phobia in 18th century Serbia to 19th century vampire literature and the current vampire craze, vampires have always represented a society's deepest fears. Whereas Slavic villagers were so terrified of epidemics that they blamed their own dead, Victorians projected their fear of noblemen suppressing the masses and their mistrust of anything sexual upon their favourite fictional foes. Contemporarily, the suspicion of the monster within ourselves is only beginning to be explored, promising many more years of vampire lore to come.

1. INTRODUCTION

Being a vampire is all about transformation: alive to dead, human to supernatural, pure to evil. It is also about the merging of binaries: the liminal state of being undead, superhuman strengths and subhuman weaknesses, the friend within the foe. The vampire narrative has explored this ambiguity by taking the shape of our deepest fears, with the vampire becoming society's ultimate scapegoat. Thus, the vampire theme has transformed itself over the turn of centuries, gaining true immortality through its adaptability.

This paper explores the transformation of the vampire motif from folklore to fiction by looking at two key elements from the narrative: the physical appearance of vampires and the killing of their victims. These two elements are traced back to their folkloric origins and compared with their manifestations in six works of early vampire fiction, namely *A Fragment of a Novel* by Lord Byron, *The Vampyre* by John Polidori, *Varney the Vampire* by an anonymous author, *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, *The Vampire of Croglin Hall* by Augustus Hare and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. Finally, the reasons for altering the folkloric source material to the shape of the fictional vampire we know today will be discussed.

2. FROM FOLKLORE TO FICTION

The Western literary vampire is based on the vampire myth in Slavic folklore, which started to develop around the time the Slavic kingdoms officially abolished their pagan beliefs in favour of Christianity in the 9th and 10th century (Perkowski 1989). Pagan traditions and rituals, however, were deeply rooted in everyday life and proved difficult to stamp out. The Bogomils, a dualistic Christian sect that was accused of engaging in pagan traditions, such as orgiastic rituals and blood sacrifice, was the most prominent group defying the Orthodox supremacy (McClelland 2006). The actual word 'vampire' first appeared in a Slavic manuscript from the 11th century, where it describes someone belonging to a certain group or religious belief, probably in a derogative sense;

it is probable that this label was also attached to the Bogomils by their contemporaries (compare McClelland 2006). The term 'vampire' itself likely acquired its supernatural attributes via a stereotyping process: the Church condemned the Bogomils' practices as immoral, which soon shifted to unnatural; from there on, it was only a small step to supernatural (McClelland 2006).

This process of supernaturalisation was completed by the beginning of the 18th century, and vampires had turned into convenient scapegoats for all the woes that plagued Slavic villagers. This scapegoat dynamic, comparable to the Western European witch craze, had been highly productive for centuries, but had stayed confined to its rural Slavic ecology. This changed in 1718, when the Austrian empire annexed parts of Serbia and Wallachia and installed a number of civil servants in these regions (Barber 1988). These civil servants were the first outsiders to witness the exhumation of supposed vampires, and they eagerly reported back to their homelands. The 1732 *Visum et Repertum* report by Austrian medical official Johann Flückinger describes the exhumation of a man suspected of vampirism in 1725, and was widely distributed all over Europe (Ellis 2000). Since Flückinger and his Western European readership were unaware of the scapegoat dynamic behind the vampire tale, they tended to mistake these accounts for a fact, which led to an animated discussion about the existence of vampires all over Europe (compare McClelland 2006).

Officials in Britain (Ellis 2000) and Austria (McClelland 2006) were quick to assure the public that the vampire concept lacked any scientific foundation, which curtailed the speculation about the existence of vampires but not the general fascination with the vampire theme. Soon, vampirism was used as a metaphor to rail against corrupt politicians "consuming the life-blood of the country" (Ellis 2000, 166–167), and appeared as a literary theme only 16 years after the *Visum et Repertum* report with the publication of Heinrich Ossenfelder's poem *Der Vampir* (Frost 1989). Vampires began taking the centre stage in prose with Byron's *A Fragment of a Novel* in 1816, and became known to the public as literary villains with Polidori's novella

The Vampyre in 1819. The serial novel *Varney the Vampire; or, the Feast of Blood*, published between 1845 and 1847, further popularised the vampire motif (Perkowski 1989), while Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871) added another level of sexiness to the theme. Augustus Hare's 1892 short story *The Vampire of Croglin Hall* is relatively close to the folkloric source material, while Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* introduced its own inventory of vampiric traits and is largely thought to have codified the fictional vampire scheme "for all time" (Frost 1989, 52). It is true that most vampire texts after 1897 seem to refer to *Dracula* and its interpretation of the vampire motif in some way.

3. CHANGES IN THE VAMPIRE MOTIF

While many aspects of the fictional vampire theme have been adapted from the folkloric motif, the narrative has nonetheless been subjected to fundamental changes. This transformation of the vampire motif becomes most obvious in the physical appearance of vampires and in the killing of their victims.

The most apparent change in the physical appearance of vampires is due to their social status. Where folkloric vampires came from the same peasant communities they haunted (Barber 2010), each and every one of the vampiric villains in the literature discussed is descended from nobility: Byron's Augustus Darvell is "a man of considerable fortune and ancient family" (G. Byron 1999, 58–59), Hare's vampire was buried in a vault like a nobleman (Hare 1892), and Lord Ruthven, Sir Francis Varney, Countess Carmilla/Mircalla Karnstein and Count Dracula even have titles to show their status. The folkloric vampires wear the same plain clothing they had been buried in (Barber 1988), while their fictional counterparts are dressed in the expensive clothing that befits their status.

They are also more seductive in general: where folkloric revenants were basically corpses in various stages of decomposition, and showed the plumpness and reddish complexion characteristic of any decaying corpse (Barber 1988), fictional vampires are usually thin, pale and attractive. This

holds true for all texts discussed in this paper, with the exception of Hare's vampire of Croglin Hall, who is "brown, withered, shrivelled, mummified" (Hare 1892, 6). But while the sexual appeal of the vampire antagonists could be considered a by-product of the sexual repression in Victorian times against which only a monster could revolt, the vampires' paleness is a feature so uncharacteristic in folklore that it is hard to pinpoint a single motivation for changing it. There are two possible explanations: not only is paleness a means to illustrate the anaemic vampire's need for blood, but aristocratic whiteness was the beauty ideal of the 19th century as well. It is likely that this pale complexion, now an indispensable part of our image of vampires, was introduced to the vampire narrative for both these reasons.

Starting with *Varney the Vampire* (Prest 1847), fictional vampires also seem to have developed permanently fang-like teeth, all the better to kill their victims with. This element is revisited both by Le Fanu in *Carmilla* (1872) and by Stoker in *Dracula* (1897), and was possibly introduced to vampire lore to accompany the narrowing options for how vampires kill their victims. While vampires in folklore were indeed believed to suck the blood of the living, they rarely chose their victim's neck to do so, instead biting them in the thorax area; at the same time, it was believed that vampires killed their victims by strangling them (Barber 1988). That changed when the vampire theme was fictionalised: Polidori's Lord Ruthven kills Aubrey's love interest by biting her in the throat (Polidori 1819), Varney drinks blood both from his victims' necks and arms (Prest 1847), and Le Fanu's Carmilla goes for her victim's throat (Le Fanu 1872), as does Hare's vampire (Hare 1892). Stoker's Dracula prefers sucking blood from his victims' necks (Stoker 1897), while Byron's *Fragment of a Novel* makes no mention of a vampire attack at all. Bloodsucking then seems to have a revitalising effect on the vampire (Prest 1847; Stoker 1987), while the strength of their victims slowly falters (Prest 1847; Le Fanu 1872; Stoker 1897).

Like in folklore, many of the victims are attacked while sleeping (compare Barber 1988). This acquires an entirely different feel when one considers the targets of such an attack: where folkloric vampires brutally

assault fellow villagers regardless of their age and gender (compare Barber 1988; Ellis 2000), fictional vampires seem to have a taste for intruding into the boudoirs of beautiful young maidens and sensually killing them by taking just a little blood at a time. In folklore, the attacked usually die shortly afterwards (compare Barber 1988), which also seems to hold true for minor characters in fiction (compare Le Fanu 1872); however, if it suits the plot, the literary characters might suffer from a prolonged period of illness like Stoker's Lucy or Le Fanu's Laura. Of course, this increases the number of illicit visits to the maiden's bedchamber, which can get rather steamy (compare Prest 1847). Since that seems to have been to the readers' taste, it is no wonder almost all of the victims in fiction are pretty young girls: only Stoker's (1897) vampires bite children and men as well, although Dracula himself seems to favour female victims.

4. A 'CONTEMPORARY MYTH': EXPLAINING THE ADAPTATIONS[1]

As shown above, adapting the vampire motif as a literary theme went hand in hand with significant alterations to the folkloric source material. Some of these changes appear to be primarily plot-related, like Lucy Westenra's lingering death. Others, like promoting the vampire from a brainless zombie to an evil mastermind, intend to establish him or her as a proper antagonist, as a force to be reckoned with. Some modifications to the original vampire corpus, however, are more strongly motivated, since they touch upon the very reason behind the persistence of the vampire motif: like the archetypical Dracula, the vampire takes the shape of whatever we fear most. Back in the Slavic villages, it was the inexplicable spread of deadly diseases or the destructive forces of nature; nowadays, the vampire turned protagonist embodies the fear of the monster inside of us. In the 19th century, people dreaded two things: unrefrained sexuality and economic insecurity.

It is a well-researched fact that the Victorians were especially uptight about anything remotely sexual. Especially women were expected to be pure and chaste, and sex was seen as a corrupting force. Strongly influenced

by the theme of transgression, the Gothic novel was then "interested in the exploration of what was forbidden" (G. Byron 1999, 2), and it is this desire that permanently attached a sexual note to the vampire theme. The literary vampire preys, above anyone else, on beautiful young maidens, on the very incarnation of innocence; this link between a girl's virginity and her desirability as a victim is painfully obvious when one of Varney's targets is told that there is no better protection against a vampire than a husband (Prest 1847). The vampire, on the other hand, is as evil and carnal as his maiden victim is pure, making her his absolute opposite. Her innocence is destroyed through the act of blood drinking: while biting a girl in the neck is reminiscent of a sensual kiss, the exchange of body fluids that goes along with it is a strong metaphor for sex itself. Sex then corrupts the victim even further when she is turned: as a vampire, Lucy is a voluptuous temptress (Stoker 1897), while the three sisters are actively trying to seduce Jonathan (Stoker 1897). The open display of their sexual desire is arguably their most horrifying trait, since this loss of control over a woman's sexuality must have been a frightening notion in the strictly patriarchal Victorian society indeed.

At the same time, it was not only the sexual nature of the vampire that was fearsome: after all, the vampire is "also the catalyst which releases subversive disruptive desire in others" (G. Byron 1999, 2). Exploring the desire within oneself was only permitted when it was simultaneously labelled as evil: when Varney attacks Flora in her bedroom, Flora feels strangely attracted to the intruder, and is immediately punished by being ferociously bitten (Prest 1847). Jonathan Harker, also, feels guilty for being attracted to Dracula's brides (G. Byron 1999). Since the fear of losing control to one's baser urges has not diminished over time, this theme has been persistent in vampire lore, with the heroine continuously being drawn to the dark sexuality of the vampire or vice versa.

Turning the villain from a next-door peasant to a remote aristocrat, on the other hand, might be the most drastic change in adapting the vampire theme. Yet it is an unsurprising one when we consider the social reality of

the 1800s: in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the aristocratic ruling class had basically lost its function, but continued its decadent lifestyle on the back of the emerging working class, thus "sucking the energy from the working […] classes" (McClelland 2006, 150). The vampire theme was almost immediately picked up as a metaphorical device to vilify corrupt politicians or noblemen (Ellis 2000). In times when the social disparity was wider than ever, this metaphor had grown so strong that it was extended to vampires in general: after all, only an aristocrat lived like a parasite off the blood of the masses, and vampires being titled as well was only a logical consequence of that. Ellis (2000, 196) notes that "the vampire theme allows topics that normally remain unspoken to be raised and addressed" and while he refers to the violation of sexual taboos within the vampire narrative, his statement also touches upon the covert criticism of the ruling classes under the cover of a supernatural villain.

While most writers used the vampire theme to covertly denounce the ruling class in general, John Polidori modelled his Lord Ruthven on one aristocrat in particular. Dissatisfied with his former employer, Lord Byron, Polidori took to criticize him rather overtly by likening the villain in his *The Vampyre* on his eccentric companion (Davies 2007). Lord Ruthven did not only inherit Byron's social status, but also his dark charms, arrogance and intelligence (Jenkins 2010), a template that befits the majority of literary vampires up to this day.

Even though it seems that Polidori has created some sort of Byronic villain to stand alongside the Byronic hero, it is certainly the scapegoat quality of the vampire theme that made it permanently acquire the social status of an aristocrat. Long a mainstream cultural unit, the vampire narrative has been feeding upon the fears of the people, and the masses fear the economic supremacy of the rich. This fear has not subsided for obvious reasons, and today's vampires are still powerful in a monetary sense we, as the masses, are defenceless against.

5. CONCLUSION

The word 'vampire' has certainly come a long way: once only a pejorative term for those defying the Church in an immoral sense, it came to signify those engaging in unnatural activities like blood sacrifice and orgies, only to symbolise a supernatural yet seemingly actual threat only a few centuries later. With vampires making convenient scapegoats upon which inexplicable catastrophes could be blamed, vampire lore was embellished until the 17th and 18th centuries, when it finally became the complex symbolic belief system associated with Slavic vampirism today.

A cultural merge between Eastern and Western Europe in the 18th century altered the vampire theme once more, with vampire exhumations increasingly attracting Western scholars. The scholars, unaware of the scapegoat dynamic of the vampire myth, reported on these exhumations in a purely scientific way, thus changing the vampire narrative once again. These reports were the ones distributed all over Western Europe in turn.

Writers in these countries, however, were quick to embellish the vampire theme with a symbolic meaning of their own: first a popular metaphor for corrupt politicians, vampires were soon used in fiction as well. Here, the vampire narrative was significantly transformed once more, with vampires taking the position of a scapegoat yet again to symbolise a manmade evil instead of a natural one, fictional vampires became noblemen like those suppressing the masses, and seductively carnal to signify the temptation the prudish Victorians were so eager to resist.

Judging from the millennium-long transformation process, it seems almost certain that the vampire theme will continue to evolve: even a thousand years after the coining of the term, vampires are society's ultimate scapegoats, taking the shape of whatever the collective of people fears the most. This is especially evident in more contemporary manifestations of the theme: modern vampires, now the protagonists of their own tales, make us fear the monsters within ourselves. It is this

adaptability that keeps the vampire narrative fresh, ensuring that it will continue to enthral us for generations to come.

NOTES

[1] The term 'Contemporary Myth' is used by McClelland (2006, 17) while describing the "ability of the vampire motif to take on new symbolic shapes according to shifts in political" and other circumstances.

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