

The Evolution of the Mythical Vampire: From Victorian to Modern Era

Alina Sajan

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Vampire fiction, in addition to its popularity, has coloured the wild imaginations of young and old alike. The novels and films, in this subgenre, are being produced like never before. Though the very term “vampire” evokes in us the picture of the bloodthirsty, luring Count Dracula, created by the Irish novelist Bram Stoker in 1897, vampire fiction had been popular long before the publication of this novel. But the question regarding the significance of vampires needs to be answered. As Ken Gelder states in the preface of his book *Reading the Vampire*, “they evoke a response that is not entirely ‘rational’ – a response that may sit somewhere in between disbelief and, in fact, a *suspension* of disbelief” (x). This paper aims at understanding the evolution of the mythical vampire into modern angelic bloodsuckers of the twenty first century as depicted in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* novels.

The first appearance of vampires in English literature can be found in the Romantic poet, Robert Southey’s poem “Thalaba the Destroyer” (1797). Critics have claimed Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, “Christabel” to be the influence in the development of vampire fiction. The beginning of vampire stories in English can be traced to John William Polidori’s “The Vampyre” (1819) and the unfinished story of the same year known as “A Fragment” by Lord Byron. English vampire literary legacy owes much to the most handsome and

controversial of the second generation of Romantic poets, Lord Byron. It is interesting to note that, “The Vampyre” was in fact inspired by the life and legend of Lord Byron. Vampire fiction in the 19th century was popularised through “Penny dreadful”, the cheap serial literature, which included particularly James Malcolm Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire* (1847).

Carmilla, the 1872 gothic novella by Irish author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu preceded Stoker’s

Dracula by 26 years.

The historical context of the conception of “The Vampyre” is interesting, as it is also the first vampire story in English. The year was 1816 and the setting, the house called Villa Diodati, rented by Lord Byron near Lake Geneva, which was visited by John Polidori, Mary Wollstonecraft, her future husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and Clair Clairmont, Mary’s half- sister. It was upon Byron’s suggestion that each member of the party ventured to write a ghost story. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Polidori’s “The Vampyre” were initiated as a result of this challenge. This is how Lord Ruthven got immortalised, as a combination of Byron’s bloodsucker Augustus Darvell and a parody of Lord Byron himself. It is quite significant that Polidori described Byron as a master-seducer with a taste for human blood.

Polidori’s story pioneered the evolution of the literary vampire, which became one of the stereotypical characters of the Gothic genre. The young English gentleman, Aubrey, meets Lord Ruthven, a man of mysterious origins, who had become a popular figure in English society. Deeply drawn to the luring character of Lord Ruthven, Aubrey loses no chance in gaining acquaintance and travelling with him to Rome. Polidori has stressed upon the demoniac features of what was to become the staple Gothic vampire, in his story “The Vampyre” such as the “deadly hue of his face”, his “dead grey eye” and “the reputation of a winning tongue”. Feeling disgusted with Lord Ruthven’s seduction of the daughter of a mutual acquaintance, Aubrey leaves for Greece. Ianthe, the Greek lover of our protagonist, warns him of the legend of the living vampire. The arrival of Ruthven is followed by Ianthe being killed by a vampire. Attacked by bandits, Ruthven succumbs to death, after making Aubrey swear concerning the secrecy of his death. Aubrey returns to London and is shocked to see Ruthven alive, young and healthy. Aubrey undergoes a nervous breakdown and dies, being helpless to protect his sister, who had got engaged to Ruthven. She is found dead,

drained of blood on wedding night. Ruthven vanishes without leaving a trace. The creepy and luring figure of Lord Ruthven which later rose to become the prototype of Victorian vampire, presents the vampire as an exotic aristocrat passionate in charming the victims before drinking their blood.

Varney the Vampire or *The Feast of Blood* is a serialised horror story by James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest which appeared in the "Penny Dreadful". In multiple junctures, he is identified as a fifteenth century English nobleman, Sir Francis Varney, who was cursed to live the life of a vampire, for killing his own son. Varney gets involved with the aristocratic Bannerworth family of Bannerworth Hall. We find the vampire activity in full swing in the very first chapters, when the beautiful Flora Bannerworth is victimised by a mysterious nocturnal assailant. In the concluding chapters we find Varney throwing himself into the crater of Mount Vesuvius, having become weary of his diabolical existence.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* published in 1872, presents a beautiful female vampire of the same name, who preys on the young English woman, Laura. Arriving as a stranger into Laura's home, Carmilla quickly establishes an ardent relationship with Laura, who is astonished to find the newcomer resemble a spectre she had seen in a nightmare while she was a child. Panic arises, as rumours regarding the mysterious deaths of maidens in nearby towns spread like a wildfire. Laura, who was deeply affected with terrible nightmares of a giant cat attacking her, subsequently falls ill. A general who was well aware about the reality of vampires, particularly about one named Millarca, visits Laura's father. In the fight that ensues between the vampire and the general, Carmilla now exposed, flees. The novel ends in a similar note as *Dracula*, when the vampire hunter finds Carmilla's hidden tomb and destroys her by driving a stake through her heart and decapitating her. It is quite evident that *Carmilla* heavily influenced *Dracula* which was to be published in 1897. The description and sensuousness of the female vampires, Carmilla in the former and Lucy Westenra in the latter are much the same. Both are endowed with rosy cheeks, lips which impart voluptuousness and an almost irresistible charm which draws their prey toward them. The narrative patterns followed in both the novels are in the form of first person accounts from the characters. But *Carmilla* is made distinct from other vampire narratives because it follows a complicated relationship between two females with a lesbian undertone.

Though there have been vampire stories preceding and succeeding Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, none could appeal to the fascination and repulsion of readers to such a great extent as this terrifying vampire. The very title of this novel refers to the historical figure, Vlad the Impaler, a 15th century prince of Wallachia, a section of modern Romania that lies south of the Carpathian mountains. Stoker had derived the knowledge of Transylvania where he located Castle Dracula, from Emily Gerard's *The Land beyond the Forest* (1888). Stoker's use of the term "nosferatu" is derived from the same work by Gerard. It was used by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau in his attempt to disguise his silent movie *Nosferatu* from *Dracula*. He tied the story to the great plague that hit Bremen, Germany in 1838.

Count Dracula, the highly polished and courteous nobleman of Castle Dracula, shadowed the deep and dark ranges of the Carpathian Mountains in Transylvania, part of the present day Romania. The novel begins with Jonathan Harker's journey to Transylvania from London to administer the business dealings of his firm, with Count Dracula. His stay at Bistritz and description of the travel to Borgo Pass on the way to Bukovina and subsequently to Castle Dracula creates varied images of approaching dread in the minds of readers.

Harker's prolonged stay with the Count as a prisoner and his encounter with three sensuous female vampires is followed by his escape as a half mad man from the castle.

Stoker has imbibed heavily from Emily Gerard's descriptions of the superstitions that thrived in Romania in the nineteenth century especially the means by which a vampire was destroyed. The preferred method was to drive a stake into the heart, followed by decapitation and the placing of garlic in the mouth prior to reburial. This method was adopted by Stoker in the novel, as a means of destroying the vampire into which young Lucy Westenra had turned as a result of constant preying by Dracula. It is through the descriptions of Dr Van Helsing that we are given an understanding of the history of the vampire. As he states in *Dracula*:

He must, indeed, have been that Voivode Dracula who won his name against the Turk, over the great river on the very frontier of Turkey-land. If it be so, then was he no common man; for in that time, and for centuries after, he was spoken of as the cleverest and the most cunning, as well as the bravest of the sons of the 'land beyond the forest.' That mighty brain and that iron resolution went with him to his grave, and are even now arrayed against us. The Draculas were, says Armenius, a great and noble race, though now and again were scions who were held by their coevals to have had dealings with the Evil One. (344)

Stoker has detailed the powers and frailties of Dracula throughout the novel. The eerie and mind numbing vampire is himself hundreds of years old with supernatural powers and weaknesses. He could be found in his form of man between the hours of noon and sunset, when he is the most weak. He was capable of controlling the weather- the storm, the fog and the thunder. He could command the rat, the owl and the bat as well as the moth, the fox and the wolf. Extreme physical strength and prowess combined with his shape shifting nocturnal talents and hypnotic abilities made him the most dreaded Byronic hero of all times. His blood curdling

yet ecstatic legendary bite and the further transformation of the victims (mostly beautiful young maidens) can kindle sparks of fear even in the minds of the least imaginative readers. But the overvaulting ability of Dracula does have its downside, the flip side of the coin. Dracula cannot handle running water, garlic, crucifixes and holy water. He virtually fears sunlight and has to be invited into a human home, before he can enter. Dracula is also portrayed as a kind of sexual predator where biting becomes a metaphor for sex. The Count's threat to destabilise science and sexual decency of Victorian period arrives a conclusion when he faces his end. The ultimate triumph of Professor Abraham Van Helsing, the Dutch vampire hunter and others in ensuring the complete destruction of the bloodthirsty vampire also symbolises the success of science over superstition.

The nineteenth century Victorian vampire narratives found its adaptation in films in the twentieth century. When we now hear about Stoker's *Dracula* the images that would immediately fill our head could be from the 1931 film of the same name starring Bela Lugosi or perhaps the Hammer remakes of 1960s and 70s or more particularly Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* in which the role of Count Dracula was given a mesmerising big screen performance by Gary Oldman. *Nosferatu* is a 1922 German Expressionist horror movie in which Max Schreck appears as Count Orlok, a plagiarised version of Count Dracula.

Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954) can be considered as the most influential example of modern vampire science fiction. Set in a future Los Angeles, the novel deals with undead cannibalistic or bloodsucking beings. The novel was later adapted into three movies namely *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971) and *I am Legend* (2007).

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of multi-volume vampire epics. Marilyn Ross' *Barnabas Collins* series (1966-71) can be considered as the first of these. It also witnessed the portrayal of vampires as tragic heroes than the traditional epitome of evil and vileness. The very same idea got repeated in Anne Rice's series of novels known as *Vampire Chronicles* and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *Saint Germain* series published from 1978. This trio set the trend for multi volume vampire sagas of the present era. The diabolical bloodsuckers with sharp canines and long nails have now transformed into stunningly attractive human figures with a conscience, torn between their repulsive dietary needs and humane values.

Stephenie Meyer, the American novelist brought out an epoch changing transformation of the mythical vampire as she proceeded with the idea for *Twilight*, as it came to her in a dream on June 2, 2003. The dream was about a human girl and a vampire who was in love with her, but thirsted for her blood. In the *Twilight* novel series, we find a group of affectionate vampires, the Romantic features reaching its peak in Edward Cullen. *Breaking Dawn*, the final of a series of vampire themed fantasy romance novels, takes us to the warmth of ecstatic imagination as it portrays covens of different generation vampires including the Olympic coven of Carlisle Cullen and his family joining sides in the battle between good and evil.

The traditional figure of devilish mythical vampire undergoes a drastic change with the publication of the *Twilight* novels. The shadowy and creepy Dracula and Lord Ruthven like figures metamorphose into loveable and caring vegetarian vampires represented by the Olympic coven. *Breaking Dawn* has changed our conception regarding the vampire myths forever as it depicts the marriage between a human and a vampire followed by Isabella Swan's delivery of a half-human, half-vampire child, Renesmee and the young mother's transformation into a new born vampire.

Dr Magdalena Grabias, assistant professor at the Department of Cultural studies at the University in Lublin, Poland, and who also will be contributing to the Dracula Conference at Trinity College, states that:

The modern day vampires are looking for love, expressing a romantic need to find a soul mate in a better world, trying to find their way in the human universe and trying to oppose their own demonic natures... The older, more traditional vampires were unashamed blood-suckers, who were never afraid to kill and never concerned themselves with such human 'nonsense' as morals and ethics.

This kind of depiction remained in vogue for a very long time since its inception in the nineteenth century. Vampires started to acquire a new form especially with the *Twilight* novels. Grabias further states that "What I find most fascinating about the change is Edward Cullen. He is concerned about the soul, he is a bit of philosopher, but he is also a teenager." She believes that it is really about Hollywood reflecting the changes in modern society.

The changing picture of mythical vampire can be attributed to the change in the modern world's conception of "difference". As Grabias rightly points out, the difference does not have to be alien or frightening, it can be accepted as something that remains different.

The vampire is increasingly being portrayed as hero rather than villain, in a reversal of the role.

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