From Monster to Teenage Fantasy

Vampires have evolved rapidly over the centuries and have gained quite the “unscary” reputation in modern popular culture. Regarding death in New England during the late 1700’s to the late 1800’s suggests vampires and vampirism as a medical practice rather than an undead creature that feeds on human blood. While, when vampires emerged in literature, folklore suggests depictions and descriptions vastly different from its fictional counterpart of the vampire. Indications from the Gothic “Endarkenment” suggest the emergence of vampires in literature and the saturation of the creature explains the further evolution of the vampire in today’s modern popular culture. The ideas of the Endarkenment including the doubt in the church, as well as, the crippling fear of the unknown are responsible for the evolving of the vampire in literature and popular culture and it no longer being “scary”.

Vampirism can be described as a medical practice that was done in New England during the late 1700’s to the late 1800’s. A term that was not coined by those who were involved in the practice, but rather those outside of the societies that did – “Called vampirism by outsiders (a term that may never have been used by those within the communities themselves) this remedy required exhuming the bodies of deceased relatives and checking them for “unnatural” signs, such as “fresh” blood in the heart. The implicit belief was that one of the relatives was not completely dead and was maintaining some semblance of a life by draining the vital force from living relatives.” (Bell 124). The modern definition of the vampire was something that did not exist among societies during this time that practiced vampirism. The corpses of those that were being practiced on and believed to still be living after death did not also share the characteristics of a blood-sucking demon, “No credible account describes a corpse actually leaving the grave to suck blood, and there is little evidence to suggest that those involved in the practice referred to it as “vampirism” or to the suspected corpse as a “vampire,” although newspaper accounts used this term to refer to the practice.” (126). Due to the timeframe and area in which these cases took place, sickness/illness was thought to have been a supernatural occurrence that counters the “predestinarian notion that ‘God causes sickness’.” (126) This was because the cases that depicted this vampirism practice were “’fringe’ areas that were Separatists, Tolerant, or unspecified in terms of religious affiliation.” (124).

The emergence of vampires in literature can be directly related to the Gothic “Endarkenment”, doubt in the church, and fear of the unknown. During a time when London was at its darkest times of it’s first inhuman way of treating other people and murder in the most sadistic way, fear of the unknown became a topic of importance, “London had witnessed one of the most sadistic serial killings in its history through the infamous ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders. … the report from the Central News Agency of a woman being attacked by a ‘well-dressed man’ who seized her by the throat again throws parallels with Stoker’s creation.” (Beresford 141). Gothic “Endarkenment” was a period of individualism and the questioning of the validity and trust in the church. The concept of deep, dark fears being transmitted into literature and monstrous creations, “… vampires appeal to the human desire for knowledge, transcendence, and control over this life and the next.” (Hallab 91). Like any other monster emerging from literature, it depicts evil and the indication of Good vs. Evil, since God is someone that cannot be trusted. Therefore, vampires are depicted as the “evil” in the world, even the “good” vampires, “The usual vampire story involves a conflict of good versus evil, with the vampire representing evil or at least something antagonistic to the accepted nature of things. Even a good vampire compels the author to deal (with greater or lesser success) with potentially complex moral and metaphysical issues, regarding, for example, what constitutes good and evil and how they are related to death and the otherworld.” (91) This fear also comes from “otherworldly” entities, that are basically originated from anywhere other than the Mother Land of England. For example, in Sheridan Le Fanu’s, *Carmilla,* the fact that the account has occurred is more believable because it takes place outside of England, “In Styria, we, though by no means magnificent people, inhabit a castle, or schloss.” (Le Fanu). Moreover, “My father is English, and I bear an English name, although I never saw England.” (Le Fanu), which gives validity and reliability of the account due to it being attested by English persons.

Vampire’s emergence in literature is due partially to its folklore of vampires that is vastly different from its counterpart of fictional vampires. The differences range from the habits of the vampire, the depictions, as well as physical characteristics. While modern vampires are depicted as “pretty” and something pleasant to look at, folklore vampires are not, “His color is never pale, as one would expect of a corpse: his face commonly is described as florid, or of a healthy color, or dark, and this may be attributed to his habit of drinking blood.” (Barber 41). When someone thinks of a vampire, their first thought of their physical characteristics is their infamous fangs for sucking blood. However, folklore rarely depicts the teeth of vampires and only mentions the teeth in regards to the belief that newborn children born with teeth are destined to be a vampire, “Although in fiction the vampire’s teeth are an essential characteristic, distinguishing him from some other monsters, in folklore the teeth are not especially prominent. Only occasionally is it remarked that his teeth had grown while he was a vampire. Some vampires do not even use their teeth to draw blood. Zelenin, for example, reports the belief that the Russian vampire has a pointed tongue, which he uses to puncture the skin of his victims.” (44). Furthermore, in vampire folklore instead of the infamous fangs being the deciding vampire trait, folklore describes vampires as swollen and full of “fresh” blood. The indicating mark of a vampire once a corpse is buried, is the failure to decompose and swell with blood, “Richard Andree, for example, in describing the Greek vrykolakas, says, ‘It is an infallible sign of a vampire when the body does not decompose in the grave, but instead swells up, while the skin becomes taut like the skin of a drum.’.” (42). We then move into the pre-modern depictions of the vampire, as in the story of Carmilla by Sheridan Le Fanu. A vampire that is not only depicted as a young female, but a beautiful young female, “… playful, languid, beautiful girl;” (Le Fanu). We are also introduced to the idea of being bitten by a vampire and its illness effects on the bitten individual.

We move on to the further evolution of the vampire in today’s modern popular culture of the vampire. This has mainly been an adaptation that was made apparent through the media, “… it was almost uniquely the theatre, cinema, and television exploitation of the being that ultimately caused the shift towards the modern conception of the vampire.” (Beresford 140). Vampires are depicted as beings of interest, sophistication, and beauty. Which, in turn, makes it easier for them to acquire victims, “Jorg Waltje suggests that ‘[Lugosi’s] portrayal of Dracula as a foreign predator in the guise of aristocratic sophistication became the role model for many vampires to come’.” (145). Popular culture movies and television shows like ‘Twilight’ and ‘Vampire Diaries’ create a personality to the vampire and move to create a relationship/attachment to the character as a vampire. The characters are given substance and a reason to feel sympathetic toward the creature. In a quote by Beresford regarding ‘Interview with a Vampire’, “What it created was a personality for the vampire, a kind of desperate being that was continually struggling to understand its cursed existence.” (148). Because of the sympathy and likeness of the vampires and referring to them as cursed beings of misunderstanding, we are led to the dissipation of fear of the vampire. Rather we regard them as, again, beings of interest, beauty, and sophistication, “The fear created by the vampire has dissipated and the vampire himself has become a parody of what he once was. The reason for this is quite simple: we no longer fear the vampire.” (140).

In conclusion, Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* is the post-folklore of vampires but on the outskirts of pre-modern popular culture. We have moved away from the gory folklore of the vampire and into the modern popular culture of vampires being beautiful and creatures of interests. However, unlike modern popular culture, Mircalla is not a vampire we are made to feel sympathetic toward and grow attached to. The Countess Mircalla instead strikes fear, the fear that a pretty face can do such damage. We then move further with the concept of a pretty face, attached with a personality but sinister tendencies that are made to feel excused because it is a “curse”. The fear of the vampire is demolished, and the vampire becomes less of monster and rather a popular icon among popular culture.

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