

From Nosferatu to Von Carstein: Shifts in the Portrayal of Vampires

A. Asbjørn Jøn

From time immemorial, man has felt confronted with evil supernatural beings, and his weapon against them has been the use of magical rites. Spirits lurked everywhere [...] vampires escaped from the dead to attack the living [...] and the] night was ruled by the creatures of evil.¹

At the present time, so close to the centenary of the publication of Bram Stoker's (1847-1912) gothic masterpiece *Dracula* (1897),² it is perhaps pertinent to consider the shifts in the image of the vampire from its folkloric and mythological beginnings to its nature in modern fictions. An impressive body of lore dealing with powerful vampire-like creatures dates back, as Kurt Seligmann's (1900-1962) above statement recognises, to ancient and primitive times. Some of the most notorious ancient vampire-like beings were the blood consuming ghosts in *The Odyssey*, the demonic Lilith of Hebrew legend and the Roman Lamia.³ Yet vampire-like beings have featured within a wide range of narratives and taken a myriad of forms. The modern day vampire, — as characterised in the debonair and aristocratic Von Carstein vampire clan or the brutal and callous Sabbat vampires — is an undead beast that has undergone an

¹ Seligmann, Kurt, *The History of Magic: A catalogue of sorcery, witchcraft, and the occult* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1997; repr. *The Magic Mirror*: Pantheon Books, 1948), p.23.

² Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*, ed. and intro. by Maurice Hindle (St. Ives: Penguin Classics, 1993; repr. Archibald Constable and Company, 1897).

³ Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. by S. H. Butcher and A. Lang, The Harvard Classics — Registered Collector's Edition (Connecticut: Grolier Enterprises Corp., 1909; repr. 1989). Notably, as *Brewer's Concise Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* [ed. by Betty Kirkpatrick (London: Helicon, 1992; repr. 1995), p.1064. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* was first published in 1870.] recognises: Lilith is referred to in various Rabbinical texts as Adam's first wife, and is usually regarded as the 'Mother of Monsters' and the original vampire, with all other vampires holding her as the root of their undead ancestry. Her name, drawn from the Semetic root for 'night' is reflective of the night-stalking of both her and her vampire children. Furthermore, in the Revised Version of the Bible (Isaiah 34:14) Lilith is called 'night-monster', while in the Vulgate she is actually referred to as Lamia. On the Lamia see M. Grant and J. Hazel's, 'Lamia', in *Who's Who in Classical Mythology* (New York: David McKay and Co., 1979), p.208.

extensive process of evolution,⁴ or mythicisation and re-mythicisation. Notably, this current image of the vampire would appear to have developed most directly from their image in Eastern European folklore, influenced by the imaginations of a series of fictional authors. In this brief review of the vampire's evolution some specific adaptations or shifts in the 'undead' beast's persona shall be discussed, after briefly considering the nature of Eastern European vampire lore.

The Eastern European vampire is essentially a product of Slavic folklore. Slavic tradition contains both descriptions of vampirism and an extensive set of customs regarding both vampire-slaying and preventative measures against the creatures. Some of their more notable pieces of vampire-lore included folk customs such as: the spreading poppy seeds within the grave; the piercing of vampires with stakes; depositing a crucifix within the coffins of suspected vampires; and the process of a human being turned into a vampire through the exchange of blood — which has come to be known as the 'embrace' in modern lore and fictions. Traditional Slavic belief also held that vampires would often feed upon cattle. Knowledge of Eastern Europe's folkloric vampire throughout Western Europe and the New World appears to have increased greatly following the emergence of material dealing with Arnold Paole's well known case of vampire staking in Serbia after 1732.⁵

Arguably the most fascinating, and perhaps also the most popular portion of the lore deals with vampires feeding upon humans — or vampiric phlebotomy. Folk belief and narratives surrounding with this phenomenon generally present a series of very similar events. They begin with tales of a member of the community (virtually always male,) passing away. In some cases that person leaves abnormal instructions with regards to the disposal of their corpse. Members of the local community are struck with ailments akin to anaemia shortly after the deceased's burial. In most cases a series of inexplicable deaths were also recorded. Those deaths, and the anaemia like ailments, are the events that the lore usually associates with vampiric phlebotomy. Generally, there are also accounts of community members witnessing darkened shapes moving about at night. In many cases those shapes have been suggested to be following lone humans. These are most often explained as visions of the vampire hunting for food/blood. Consequently, the deceased is then exhumed, and displays no signs of degeneration. Many examples of vampire-lore include details

⁴ See: 'Von Carstein' in *Tuomas Pirinen and Alessio Cavatore, Vampire Counts* (London: Games Workshop Ltd., 1999), p.13; and Steven C. Brown, *Storyteller's Handbook to the Sabbat* (California: White Wolf Publishing, 1993).

⁵ See Sir James Frazer: 'Slovenian and Bulgarian peasants conceive cattle plague as a sign of the presence of a vampire'. Notably it was also believed that the vampire could be 'kept at bay by interposing a barrier of fire between it and the herds'. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edn., intro. and ed. by W. Stocking Jr (St Ives: Penguin, 1996), p.769. *The Golden Bough* was first published in 1890.

about the nature of the corpse at this stage, including notes that: the lips were red, as if bloated with blood; the flesh pallid and the hair and nails having grown. The depiction of the vampire at this stage — as far as the red blood-bloated lips, the pallid flesh and the 'living' hair — to an extent, has carried over into modern fictions. Exempligratia, these features were certainly made use of in the recent film production of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* for the scenes surrounding Lucy's second and final death.⁶



Figure 1: Jacket of *Varney the Vampire*

One of the more interesting reports of vampirism exists within Charles

⁶ Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Columbia Pictures, 1992).

Ferdinand de Schertz's work of 1706, the *Magia Posthuma*.⁷ The details of this case have been reported many times, perhaps most notably since their original recounting, by Charles W. Oliver in his *Handbook of Magic and Witchcraft* (1928).⁸ The case deals with a shepherd from a small village near the then Bohemian town of Kadam (a historical region of the present day Czech Republic). It was alleged that after the boy's burial, he was seen out of his grave, and that the boy caused various members of his community to lose their vitality and subsequently die themselves. This led the townsfolk to exhume his body. De Schertz recounted tales that the boy's corpse was free from signs of corruption, and that after unsuccessful attempts to drive a stake through his body he was buried once again. Reports were taken of the dead boy being seen walking during the next night. The shock associated with these reports quickly lead to a second exhumation of the boy's body. The townsfolk had an executioner remove the body from the village and take it to a local field to be cremated. When the executioner attempted to transport the corpse it displayed numerous signs of animation, striking out with its arms and legs. In an effort to stop the corpse from attacking in such a manner a stake was successfully struck through the 'undead' body, causing extensive bleeding and screams from the corpse. This measure eventually returned the body to a motionless state. After the cremation the 'victims' of the dead boy were reported to make full recoveries from their ailments.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of de Schertz's recount is the important point that the vampire was able to move within daylight without any notable ill effects. Tradition holds that the vampire is drawn towards the earth during daylight hours, and must sleep undisturbed, actually unable to wake. Some sources have even attributed the mystic power of sinking directly into the earth during the daylight hours to the vampire, as a means for avoiding the toxic effects that daylight may have upon them. Furthermore, direct contact with the rays of the sun is customarily believed to cause a vampire to ignite, or simply crumble to dust. This variant makes the tale all the more interesting to the scholar of vampiric lore. Notably however this variant has also been used in other vampire tales. The modern fantasy novelist David Niall Wilson attributed this powerful variant attribute to both the vampire Kli Kodesh and all of the vampires that he had embraced within his recent *The Grail's Covenant* trilogy.⁹

⁷ Schertz, Charles Ferdinand de, *Magia Posthuma* (Olmütz, 1706).

⁸ Oliver, Charles W., *Handbook of Magic and Witchcraft* (London: Rider and Co., 1928), pp.159-161.

⁹ Wilson, David Niall, *To Sift through Bitter Ashes* (Canada: White Wolf Publishing, 1997); *To Speak in Lifeless Tongues* (Canada: White Wolf Publishing, 1997); and, *To Dream of Dreamers Lost* (Canada: White Wolf Publishing, 1998).

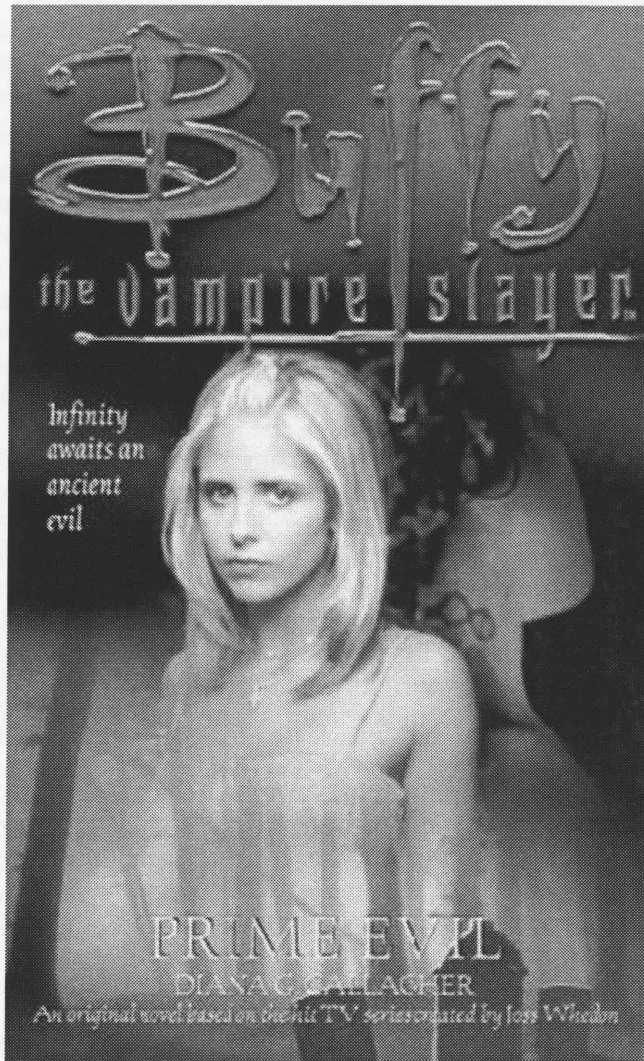


Figure 2: Diana G. Gallagher, *Prime Evil: Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

It is important to recognise that de Schertz's report is but one of many. Various reports of alleged vampirism have survived, and consequently, the body of lore surrounding the mythic beasts is quite rich. Perhaps the most noteworthy of those accounts of contemporary vampirism is that provided by the Imperial Provisor of Gradisk District (Serbia) in 1725 with regard to Peter Plogojowitz.¹⁰ The most interesting feature of the

¹⁰ Imperial Provisor — Gradisk District, 'Report of 1725', trans. by Paul Barber, in *The Oxford Book of the Supernatural*, ed. by D. J. Enright (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Imperial Provisor's report is that unlike de Scheretz's it fits exactly within the template of the stock vampire tale — as opposed to adapted or re-mythicized representations of such creatures in later lore and fictions — fulfilling each aspect of the broader folk legend.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries vampires have featured heavily within literature, holding the imaginations of many writers. This has led to fictional adaptations of vampire lore assuming positions within the broader body of folk beliefs. Those adaptations generally only find a solid place within the lore after they are accepted by a great many writers and commentators. Perhaps the most obvious way that the vampire was adapted through this process is in his/her physical characteristics and sexual roles. The traditional vampire was both plump and of peasant stock, as contrasted to the slender and often aristocratic vampires of modern fictions and contemporary lore.¹¹ Respectable modern scholars such as J. S. Ryan and Paul Barber have recognised that 'the chubbiness has been omitted in accounts of fictional vampires as not sufficiently sinister'.¹² This valid point is quite pertinent. It is also widely acknowledged that in recently published lore and fictions dealing with vampires, the beasts are often the objects of sexual encounters¹³ and other adult themes. Consequently, the slender and often shapely vampire may also be the result of various writers' needs to present a more aesthetically pleasing individual so as to make such scenes more appealing to their audiences.

Notably the marketed images of vampire related products have also changed in this way, as is demonstrated by comparing figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 depicts a nineteenth-century jacket for *Varney the Vampire*, while Figure 2 displays a recent jacket for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.¹⁴ The first jacket sports images of horror. The central figure, a vampire, shows bat-like wings and an almost skeletal appearance as it moves within a graveyard. This contrasts with the glossy production of the second jacket. The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* jacket is crested with the image of a highly attractive young woman, crisp images and deep colours. The imagery

1994), pp.210-212. The extract was originally published in Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

11 For an example of the aristocratic nature of some modern fictional vampires consider: 'Handsome, arrogant, charismatic and proud, the Von Carsteins are the true aristocracy of the night.' (p.13); and, 'Lahmians form the female aristocracy that feeds on mortal cattle each night' (p.14) in Tuomas Pirinen and Alessio Cavatore, *op.cit.*

12 Ryan, J. S., 'The Vampire before and after Stoker: Analysis of Vampirism in History and in Literature almost a Century after Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)', *Contemporary Legend*, 3 (1993), 145-154 (p.148). See also Paul Barber, *op.cit.*, pp.44-5.

13 On this point consider the intimate scenes between the fledgling vampires Michael and Star in the cult vampire film, *The Lost Boys*, directed by Joel Schumacher (Warner Brothers, 1987).

14 Gallagher, Diana G., *Prime Evil, Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, (USA: Mass Market Paperbacks, 2000). James Malcolm Rymer, *Varney the Vampire: Or the Feast of Blood* (London, 1847).

presents a sexy and modern image that could be considered typical of the work of many modern advertising campaigns marketed toward teenagers and young adults.¹⁵

'The wicked desirability of Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla* (1872) would appear to have been a major influence within the development of this adaptation of vampire lore. This text contains much sexual innuendo, including a charged passage depicting of a female vampire visiting a human male in his bedchamber. The visit seems to hold many notions that have later been adopted into vampire-erotica with descriptions such as:

I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. I looked at her with a kind of pleased wonder, and ceased whimpering. She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment.¹⁶

This leaning towards the intimate nature of a vampire's bite was developed much further in the twentieth century. The publishers White Wolf present the appearance and bite of a vampire in a very erotic manner in the following fictional passage, drawn from the rule book for their role-playing game, *Vampire: the Masquerade*:

Those eyes. Like orbs of black steel. I stare into them and I am lost. His caress lingers on my face for a heartbeat and then his fingers drift around my neck. His eyes, so gentle — they offer me no mercy. Like a wolf he pounces. His fangs rake across my throat and pierce my skin. A blaze of heat: rapture. He licks at my essence as it pours from my gullet, then he begins to suck. I cling to him like a drowning sailor, like a lover. My rock. My lust.¹⁷

Recent films such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, have also presented vampiric phlebotomy as a highly erotic practice. In presenting the scenes surrounding Jonathan Harker's forbidden exploration of Dracula's castle, the film presents reasonably explicit scenes of three bi-sexual female vampires feeding from Jonathan's flesh intermixed with their kissing and sensual touching, both of Jonathan and each other, and reclining in an

¹⁵ Taylor, Lucy, 'A word from the developer', in Lucy Taylor and John Bolton, *Eternal Hearts* (Canada: White Wolf Publishers, 1999), pp.8-9 (p.8).

¹⁶ J. Sheridan LeFanu, *Carmilla* (1872). The text of *Carmilla* has been made available on the Internet at: <http://www.sff.net/people/DoyleMacdonald/carmil01.htm>

¹⁷ Rein-Hagan, Mark, 'Seduction', in *Vampire: the Masquerade* (Canada: White Wolf Publishing, 1998), p.19.

intertwined state upon a large bed. When Dracula appears, ordering them to leave Jonathan alone, they flocked immediately to kneel at his feet much akin to the image of slave-girls in modern fictional literature. The portrayal of bi-sexual vampiric beings such as these is quite common within modern vampire fictions. The most striking example is perhaps the portrayal of the vampire Lestat within the mainstream film *Interview with a Vampire* (1994).¹⁸ Lestat not only displays a clear sexual interest in women, but also participates in a close relationship with the vampire Louis de Pointe du Lac — whom Lestat embraced early within the film — that critics have generally labelled as a portrayal of soft mainstream homoeroticism.¹⁹

A number of further examples of sexual imagery or actions being associated with vampiric phlebotomy also exist within both *Interview with a Vampire* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, while feeding upon Lucy's blood, Dracula — in a bestial form — is clearly displayed as having sexual intercourse with the girl. The sensual nature of the scene that portrays the blood exchange between Dracula and Mina might also be considered as a clear example. These instances can be compared to the soft, tasteful *ménage à trois* imagery associated with both Lestat and Louis de Pointe du Lac draining a bar girl of her life's-blood within a New Orleans inn; or the highly suggestive image of Lestat feeding upon a woman by piercing one of her nipples through her dress, in *Interview with a Vampire*.

The vampire imagery presented within *Bram Stoker's Dracula* would appear to have also deeply influenced the presentation of vampires within other, more recent, fictional portrayals of vampire lore. All four of the vampire clans of Games Workshop's 'Old World' share imagery with the portrayal of Dracula within different parts of the film. The Blood Dragon clan would appear to follow the imagery of the Count as a member of the Order of the Dragon, as he was presented in the beginning of the film, clad in warriors armour. The aristocratic figure connected with wolves and the black coach would appear to coincide nicely with the image of the Von Carstein clan. The images of the female blood-sucking beasts that present themselves filled with sensuality to Jonathan Harker are reminiscent of the Lahmians. Finally, the image of the dark Dracula, calling forth the power of evil curses when he turns from the Christian God must surely be a use of similar imagery to that of Games Workshop's Necrarch vampires. The physical characteristics of the Necrarch vampires are also akin to those that are displayed by Dracula whilst changing from his human to his beast forms. Consequently, it is possible to argue that the portrayal of vampires within that film has been quite influential upon other various later vampire

¹⁸ *Interview with a Vampire*, directed by Neil Jordan, screenplay by Anne Rice (Geffen Pictures, 1994).

¹⁹ See Tuomas Pirinen and Alessio Cavatore, *op. cit.*

fictions.

Movement towards sexually charged vampire fiction and lore has taken even further steps within the role-playing game, *Vampire: the Masquerade*, which has achieved cult status amongst the North American 'Goth' sub-culture. The game includes entire sections of rules dealing with the ways in which vampires may 'seduce' others. Within the game these rules may be manipulated to include the seduction of both Non-player Characters (the mortals and/or vampires who are controlled by the person running the game, as a part of the 'world'), and Player Characters, or the other characters played by game participants. One recent reviewer even went as far as to brand the *Vampire: The Masquerade* novel, *Eternal Hearts*, as 'an erotic journey'.²⁰ Additionally, it takes but little investigation to note the similarities between the World of Darkness vampire/ghoul relationship, and the sexually charged master/slave relationship of fictional writings. In *Eternal Hearts* ghouls even refer to vampires as 'Master',²¹ a strong slavery theme that as has been illustrated above, was also present within Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. That novel also explores the sexually submissive role of the enslaved ghouls. The nature of the White Wolf Vampire/ghoul relationship has even lead the company to augment their Internet site with a section titled: 'Is Ghouls: Fatal Addiction too Adult?'²² — following the publication of their rule-book dealing with the use of Ghouls — on which they make statements such as:

In author Justin Achilli's own words, "This is an ugly, ugly book." The Sales Department made the decision to polybag it, this time for content. There's a portrayal of a snuff film.'

It might further be noted that *White Wolf's Vampire: the Masquerade* has also included guidelines for vampiric characters related to 'sadism', a mindset that is often associated with alternate sexual practices.²³

In order to accommodate these shifts in the portrayal of vampires the setting that the beasts are portrayed within has also changed. While the traditional folkloric vampire was a creature that moved within peasant villages, the modern vampire appears to primarily inhabit either a castle-like setting, or a stylised gothic-punk vision of our modern world.²⁴

²⁰ Rein-Hagan, Mark, 'Seduction', in *op.cit.*, p.217.

²¹ 'Eternal Hearts', in Military Simulations Mail Order Catalogue, Autumn 2000, p.22. See also Lucy Taylor and John Bolton, *Eternal Hearts*.

²² Taylor, Lucy and John Bolton, *op. cit.*, p.19.

²³ White Wolf, 'Is Ghouls: Fatal Addiction too Adult?', <http://www.white-wolf.com>

²⁴ See 'Sadism: Relishing Suffering', in Daniel Greenberg and Teeuwynn, *Elysium — The Elder Wars: Secrets in Generational Genocide* (California: White Wolf Publishing, 1998), pp.13-14.

On vampires moving within castle-like settings see both: Bram Stoker, *op. cit.*; and, Guy Davis and Vince Locke, 'A Fool's Embrace', in *Dark Tyrants: A Vampire/ the Dark Ages*

Notably, when depicted within castle-like settings they are no longer customarily the lord of the estate. While the castle-like, aristocratic settings are primarily literary devices employed to accentuate a dark fiction, the notion of placing the vampire within a modern day city based environment is much more interesting. Just as the village was the surrounds of the folk within the cultures that more traditional vampire lore grew from, a city is the primary environment for people today. Through this adaptation the vampire has remained a mythic beast that is closely connected to contemporary built environments throughout the ages. The vampire has in this way participated in the process of the mythicization the built environment within the post-industrial world.

Intriguingly Warner Brothers have even stated in connection to their vampire film *The Lost Boys* that they have set out about 'bringing new life to the age-old Vampire lore'.²⁵ Notably much of the focus upon vampires, especially those depicted within stylised gothic-punk settings such as those of *The Lost Boys*, *Eternal Hearts* and *Vampire: The Masquerade*, have been within nations such as Australia and the United States of America, which are still participating within a folkloric discourse of the mythicisation of 'new' landscapes. This mythicisation of landscapes is a process which in a way allows immigrants to relate to their new landscapes in a more spiritual and cultural way by superimposing important elements of their own folk traditions and beliefs upon those landscapes. Notably vampire-lore would seem to have claimed a considerable place within that process.

Finally, the development of the vampire into a being that is usually presented with a very dominant sexuality can perhaps also be tied into the process of the beast being adapted in order to remain relevant to its shifting contemporary audiences throughout the ages. The bulk of modern vampire 'products' would appear to be overtly marketed towards the adolescent and young adult consumer groups. The myth of the vampire also seems to hold a special interest to members of those age brackets within today's society.²⁶ It would thus appear more than coincidental that a sexually charged mythic beast should hold special interest to groups within society that are passing through life stages within which they must make certain decisions about their sexual roles and preferences. In this way the vampire takes a further step toward becoming a mythic beast or motif that interlocks with both the social setting and geographical locations of those who draw most heavily upon its lore in the modern period.

Anthology, ed. by Justin Achilli and Robert Hatch (Georgia: White Wolf Publishing, 1997), pp.4-29. On the alternate gothic-punk environment consider Mark Rein-Hagen's following statement: 'Gothic-Punk is a way of describing the setting in brief. It is a metaphor for our own world, a warning of what we might become and a shadow of the sickness that infects us now.' *op. cit.*, p.29.

²⁵ *The Lost Boys*, *op.cit.*, printed on the jacket.