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THE VAMPIRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

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The myth of the vampire has fascinated people for ages. Superstitions and folktales about the undead have been documented at least as far back as the fifteenth century, and even today there are still some who believe that these creatures rise from their graves at night to suck the blood of their hapless victims. Whether or not one believes the tales, the vampire has been one of the most frequently used supernatural characters in literature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, interest in the supernatural seemed to die as writers turned to more serious and realistic topics. In the past two decades, however, numerous short stories and novels have been written about vampires, perhaps indicating a shift toward what some might call escapist literature. Some of the recent works, including Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, *The Vampire Lestat*, and *Queen of the Damned*, have enjoyed a widespread, if somewhat cultish, audience.

Although tales of the undead circulated for many years, it was not until the nineteenth century that writers began to use the vampire in literature. According to Arthur H. Nethercot, "the vampire, in fact, was surprisingly slow to forge its way into literature; by the end of the eighteenth century it had hardly got even a precarious foothold."¹ James B. Twitchell says, "As we have seen, around the turn of the nineteenth century the English and German Romantic poets were experimenting with the vampire myth as a metaphor for the psychology of human interactions."² Many of the major Romantic poets used the vampire in poems, and the nineteenth century can be seen as the heyday of the vampire story, for the most influential works about vampires, including the most famous, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, were written in that century. Thus, during the nineteenth century, the model for vampire literature became fixed. As it moved from its beginnings with Samuel Taylor Coleridge to its peak with Bram Stoker, the myth of the vampire became solidified, each writer influencing those who came after him. The trail of influence can be traced to Stoker, and there the trail stops for many years.

The figure of the vampire, which most people identify as the sole creation of Bram Stoker, was first used by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a poem he began writing in 1798, 100 years before the publication of *Dracula*. Coleridge was not an innovator with the figure of the

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vampire, either. One source which Nethercot says influenced Coleridge was the *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*. John Ferriar, one of the contributors to this journal, devotes part of his article "Observations concerning the Vital Principle" to a discussion of vampires. This source provided Coleridge with information for "Christabel" and the vampire Geraldine, as did Southey's poem "Thelaba and the Destroyer" (which Coleridge read in draft form and commented upon) and Goethe's "The Bride of Corinth." Nethercot further says that if he is right about the research and thought processes Coleridge went through in writing "Christabel," "then Coleridge must go the additional distinction of being the first to introduce the vampire into English literature" (Nethercot, pp. 59-70, 78).

Coleridge's poem deals with at least three aspects of the vampire myth with which readers have become familiar. In the early lines of the poem, the reader is given two hints that Geraldine is evil. She appears to faint as she is about to step over the threshold of the castle, but Christabel helps her across. The inability of a vampire to enter a potential victim's home without an invitation has become an integral part of vampire lore. Once Geraldine is in the house, the old mastiff moans in her sleep. Again, the fear and agitation of animals when a vampire is near has become a part of the vampire legend. The morning after her rescue by Christabel, Geraldine appears to be a different woman. In lines 370-376, the reader finds that Geraldine is no longer haggard and withered. She is now "fairer yet! and yet more fair! /for she belike hath drunken deep / Of all the blessedness of sleep!"³ Another piece of vampire lore, the rejuvenation of the vampire after it has fed off its victim, can be seen here.

The romantic poets are not the only literary artists of the nineteenth century to use the vampire. Many prose writers of the nineteenth century used the undead figure in their works. Those who followed Coleridge took the basic pattern the poet had used, and each successive prose writer altered the material, influencing those who came later, mainly Stoker, who is remembered as the greatest writer of vampire literature. While two of the works which preceded *Dracula* are largely forgotten today, it is interesting to note the influences they had on Stoker.

In his book *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, James B. Twitchell comments:

...[I]t was not until 1819, when an irascible Scotsman, John Polidori, published his novella, *The Vampyre*, that the myth was finally exploited for its own sake. (p. 103)

A friend of Lord Byron's, Polidori traveled with Byron and the Shelleys in Switzerland. He began his tale the same weekend that Mary Shelley began writing *Frankenstein*. *The Vampyre* has often been attributed to Lord Byron, but it is Polidori's work. The book is difficult to obtain now, but Phyllis Roth mentions *The Vampyre* as a work that surely influenced those writers who came after Polidori. She posits that Count Ruthven "prefigures the cold aristocratic fascination exercised by Count Dracula."⁴

The next work to influence the myth is Thomas Preskett Prest's *Varney the Vampyre, or the Feast of Blood*, published in 1847. Twitchell has little good to say about *Varney*, but he does say that the author of *Varney* is responsible for many of the innovations which readers traditionally attribute to Bram Stoker. These include "the initiation of the heroine through sex, the vampire's middle-European background, the quasi-medical-scientific explanations, the midnight vigils, the mob scene...[and] the hunt and the chase" (Twitchell, p. 124). Daniel Farson, Stoker's great-nephew and biographer, also points out some similarities between *Varney* and *Dracula*. He writes: "There are hints of *Dracula* here: the white face; the fanglike teeth; the angelic victim; the male vampire at his 'hideous repast.'"⁵ This description could fit Stoker's Count as easily as it does Prest's *Varney*.

In 1872 Joseph Sheridan LeFanu added to the breadth of the vampire story. His story "Carmilla" is much better known than either Polidori's or Prest's works. "Carmilla" parallels Coleridge's "Christabel" in many ways. Actually, "Carmilla" seems to be "Christabel" in its finished form. LeFanu takes Coleridge's basic story and follows it to its conclusion where Carmilla is unmasked as the fiend that she really is and finally destroyed.

"Carmilla" is probably the last great vampire story to come along before *Dracula*. Unlike Polidori and Prest, LeFanu uses a female vampire, and the eroticism evoked by the demon Carmilla has prompted many critics to comment on what Michael H. Begnal calls the "aberrant sexuality" of the vampire story.⁶ Ivan Melada points out that "Carmilla" has a strong connection to the vampire literature that came before it. He writes:

LeFanu uses some aspects [of the old tales] directly; such as the usual method of destroying a vampire; some he

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modified, he avoids the crudeness of the vampire's shrinking from a crucifix, for example. Still others he changes completely; instead of the traditionally hideous cadaverous female vampire, Carmilla is pettily feminine and beautiful.⁷

With the publication of "Carmilla" the legend was well on its way to being formalized. The greatest of the vampire stories, which established the legend for about eighty years, was published in 1897. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has frequently been overlooked as a piece of literature, as Twitchell points out (p. 132):

Dracula, the greatest vampire novel, is the work of fiction that takes the vampire out of literature and returns him to folklore. As a literary work, *Dracula* has suffered from this achievement, for although the novel has been exceedingly popular, there have been few critical commentaries about it. This is certainly because the vampire and *Dracula* have become synonymous, and the vampire is hardly considered a scholarly subject, but also because the book appeared in 1897, at the height of literary Realism and Naturalism. Had it been written in 1820, I suspect that it would have been hailed, as *Frankenstein* is, as a Romantic milestone.

Instead, *Dracula* became widely read. Although it is largely a critically ignored book, the novel has never been out of print since it was first published. Numerous theories have been bandied about concerning *Dracula*, including psychosexual and political ones, but it seems more likely that *Dracula* is "the culmination of the Romantic interest in the vampire" (Twitchell, p. 140).

With *Dracula*, Stoker wrote what might well be called the definitive work of literature dealing with vampires. From the notes preserved in the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia, Phyllis Roth says that Stoker's sources for the novel are obvious. As well as the vampire works discussed earlier, Roth cites Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Byron's "Manfred" and "Cain," and Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "Lamia" as sources, also (Roth, p. 97). One of the most obvious sources for the novel, however, is "Carmilla." According to Roth (p. 98):

...[I]t ["Carmilla"] is demonstrably the precursor to a chapter excised from the final version of the novel [*Dracula*], a chapter entitled "Dracula's Guest." Indeed, Transylvania was not the original location of Castle

Dracula, rather than that which replaces "Styria" in the notes, a name which Stoker lifted from *Carmilla*.

In "Dracula's Guest," Stoker also lifts the character of a countess who has committed suicide and thus becomes a vampire. Roth states (p. 98) that "the focus in *Carmilla* exclusively on female vampires provides an important key to the emphasis in Stoker's novel."

In researching *Dracula*, Stoker also became aware of the legend of Vlad the Impaler, or Vlad Dracula. Vlad the Impaler, a fifteenth century Wallachian ruler, was a man of very sadistic tastes. In researching the historical basis for Stoker's character, Raymond T. McNally found

underlying the local traditions...an authentic human being fully as horrifying as the vampire of fiction and film—a 15th century prince who had been the subject of many horror stories even during his own lifetime...."⁸

The notes for *Dracula* indicate that Stoker was familiar with the legend of Vlad the Impaler. One such indication, according to Roth, is that "he observes one of several meanings of 'Dracula,'... 'Dracula' in Wallachian means Devil. Wallachians were accustomed to give it as a surname to any person who rendered himself conspicuous by courage, cruel actions or cunning." Roth goes on to conclude (p. 94):

Thus, from *Dracula*, the Impaler whose greatest pleasure derived from the prolonged draining of the victim's blood, through dragon, to Devil, to the vampire was not a very long stretch of the imagination, though Stoker may have been the first to make the connection.

Dracula was the culmination of a century's work on the vampire myth. As Twitchell so rightly points out, Realism and Naturalism did put an end to supernatural stories, and interest in the vampire appears to have died out in the early twentieth century. Coleridge, Polidori, Prest, LeFanu, and Stoker, however, have not been forgotten. The current trend toward the use of the vampire in literature makes one wonder if the pendulum is swinging back toward the Romantic and away from the Naturalistic and Realistic. Current authors who deal with the vampire in literature tend to abide by the rules nineteenth century authors created in their works, although Anne Rice has made some changes in the myth, updating and sophisticating the legend in her works which deal with the origin and history of the vampire. Only time will tell if this swing means that King's and Rice's stories will hold the future's

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interest the way LeFanu's and Stoker's have captivated two centuries of spellbound audiences.

NOTES

¹Arthur H. Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine: A Study of the History, Background, and Purposes of Coleridge's "Christabel"* (1935; New York, 1962), pp. 70-71.

²James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Durham, N.C., 1981), p. 103.

³Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Christabel," *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (San Diego, 1967), pp. 413-422.

⁴Phyllis A. Roth, *Bram Stoker* (Boston, 1982, p.) 95.

⁵Daniel Farson, *The Man Who Wrote Dracula: A Biography of Bram Stoker* (New York, 1976), p. 138.

⁶Michael H. Begnal, *Joseph Sheridan LeFanu* (Lewisburg, Pa., 1971), p. 44.

⁷Ivan Melada. *Sheridan LeFanu* (Boston, 1987), p. 100.

⁸Raymond T. McNally, and Radu Florescu, *In search of Dracula: a true history of Dracula and vampire legends* (New York, 1972), p. 10.