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VAMPIRES THAT GREW SICK OF DRACULA

Vampiros que enjoaram de Drácula

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Abstract

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is considered a cornerstone when the subject is vampires. Although there were important works written before Stoker's, such as "The Vampyre" (1819) by John Polidori and *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu, it was *Dracula* that established a vampiric genre and influenced countless works that came afterwards. Vampires in the contemporary, however, present some primordial differences when compared to the 19th century Count. Their relation with humans, who once were seen just as prey, evolves in the 20th and 21st century. It can be argued that these differences are due to the age those blood sucking monsters were created and "live" among society.

Keywords: Dracula. Vampires. 21st century.

Resumo

Drácula de Bram Stoker (1897) é considerado uma pedra angular quando o assunto são vampiros. Embora houvesse obras importantes escritas antes de Stoker, como "O Vampiro" (1819) de John Polidori e *Carmilla* (1872) de Sheridan Le Fanu, foi Drácula quem estabeleceu um gênero vampírico e influenciou inúmeras obras que vieram depois. Os vampiros no contemporâneo, no entanto, apresentam algumas diferenças primordiais quando comparados ao conde do século XIX. A relação deles com os humanos, que antes eram vistos como presas, evolui nos séculos 20 e 21. Pode-se argumentar que essas diferenças se devem à era em que esses monstros sugadores de sangue foram criados e "vivem" em sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Drácula. Vampiros. Século 21.

INTRODUCTION

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is considered a cornerstone when the subject is vampires. Although there were important works written before Stoker's, such as "The Vampyre" (1819) by John Polidori and *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu, it was *Dracula* that established a vampiric genre and influenced countless works that came afterwards. For Mathias Clasen in "Attention, Predation, Counterintuition: Why Dracula Won't Die",

> Count Dracula is a contextually inflected embodiment of ancient, evolved terrors: the vampire is a supercharged predator, a fierce beast reminiscent of ancestral predators to which we are hardwired to attend, the kind with sharp teeth and homicidal intent. He is also highly contagious, a parasitic disease-bearer, a supernaturally animated corpse with a range of disturbing abilities and connotations. (CLASEN, 2012, p. 381)

Among Dracula's innumerous predator qualities, the Count's seductive power is especially honored through generations of mesmerizing monsters in different media. Vampires in the contemporary, the sensual predators of the literature in our own time, however, present some primordial differences when compared to the 19th century Count. Their relation with humans, who once were seen just as prey, evolves in the 20th and 21st century. It can be argued that these differences are due to the age those blood sucking monsters were created and "live" among society. No longer under Victorian age's scrutiny, vampires are allowed to mingle and establish important relationships with humans. The chosen humans, however, are not free from having to face moral dilemmas while engaging with super natural beings.

The moral dilemmas faced by humans in vampiric genre are often related to religious motifs. In *Dracula*, crucifixes, holy water and sacred wafers are used successfully against the monster. These religious artifacts become effective against the vampire for what they represent, i.e., holiness. For some contemporary works, although religious motifs are often still present, their depiction of religion is not exclusively a positive one, which is only possible in an era when people are allowed to have different faiths or even to not have any belief.

It is not the purpose of this article to deny *Dracula*'s influence over subsequent works. Quite the contrary, one can only "grow sick" of anything after having much of it. Such an appalling and mesmerizing monster like Dracula is not only capable of enticing his victims but also readers throughout generations, making them and the characters in the novel turn page after page of the journals, newspaper clippings, and letters in search of clues about the vampire's origin, weaknesses, strengths, and purposes. One of the powerful traits of the novel that makes it so influential is its ability to be pertinent and exciting for both that first and the subsequent generations of readers. Dracula becomes a modern myth, heard of by people who never read Stoker's novel. Indeed, Dracula remains a fascinating character even today, still being a source of inspiration for other books, plays and movies. Clasen (2012, p. 378) states,

> There are now many Draculas – sexy Draculas, disgusting Draculas, malevolent Draculas and tender-hearted ones, Stoker gave the world a vile antagonist who went straight for the jugular. Stoker did not just create a melodramatic potboiler. He wrote an enduring horror story, one that connected squarely with anxieties peculiar to the Victorian fin de siècle while appealing to adaptive dispositions that transcend this historical period; indeed, dispositions that are common to us all.

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Clasen's use of "Draculas" instead of "vampires," emphasizes that despite the existence of these multiple and diverse monsters, they all share at least one of Dracula's characteristics, be it one of his weaknesses or one of his strengths. Moreover, Dracula's capability of embodying Victorian anxieties makes other vampire authors fascinated by the metaphorical possibilities of vampires in general. Dracula, although not the first influential work for vampire fiction, establishes certain behavioral rules for subsequent monsters, i.e, what they eat, where they sleep, how they can reproduce, when they can attack, and how they are destroyed. What a vampire should be, or what he or she should not, is frequently associated with the vampires in Bram Stoker's novel. Ken Gelder in *Reading the Vampire* writes,

> vampire fiction is peculiar in this sense: although it is flexible in so many other ways, it depends upon the recollection and acting out of certain quite specific "lores" for its resolution – that vampires must be invited into the house before they can enter, that they are repelled by garlic, that they cannot cross rivers, that they need their own earth to sleep on and so on. Some recent vampire fiction, of course, depends on the frustrating of the kinds of "lore" one assumed would work against them: modern vampires can thus themselves have a disillusionary function, moving around in the daylight and not fearing crucifixes any more. The fiction now uses "lore" as a point of reference, trading on the reader's familiarity with it – taking it "seriously", even exaggerating its use and effects (as in the Hammer vampire films), or parodying it or modifying it. (GELDER, 1994, p. 35)

The "lores," as Gelder calls it, in the quotation above are characteristics first used to describe Count Dracula. After Dracula, vampires can fit his definition, extrapolate, or negate it; but they all are situated in relation to him. As vampire Lestat, from Anne Rice's vampire series, says in 1984, "Everybody was sick of Count Dracula" (RICE, 1991, p. 9). Nevertheless, other vampires kept quoting him, even if to excite the envy of his popularity, and claim his rules to be obsolete.

1 VAMPIRES THAT GREW SICK OF DRACULA

Dracula reinforces Christian values, through the characters' slow recognition of a monster that threatens by creating its own form of religious cult, and afterwards through the destruction of this evil. Vampires and religious themes, however, are not exclusive of this 1897 novel. Charlaine Harris' series of books *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001-2013), and its HBO drama series adaptation *True Blood* (2008), portray human beings that are either too keen to venerate vampires, or to destroy them in name of their beliefs. For instance, the Fellowship of the Sun, a religious pseudo-Christian group with the sole purpose of destroying vampires, resembles Dracula's hunting crew, a team assembled by Van Helsing in order to stop the Count. Both groups claim to carry God's will of annihilating the blood-sucking monsters from the planet. However, the constant failure of the Fellowship of the Sun in their fight against vampires, and their hate for and violence against whoever crosses their path only expose them as intolerant fanatics, while in *Dracula*, the hunting crew's success contributes with an overall positive view of their religious claims and moral values.

Differently from Count Dracula, vampires in Harris' works are incredibly human. They not only share intimacy with humans, but they are capable of goodness and evilness. They have

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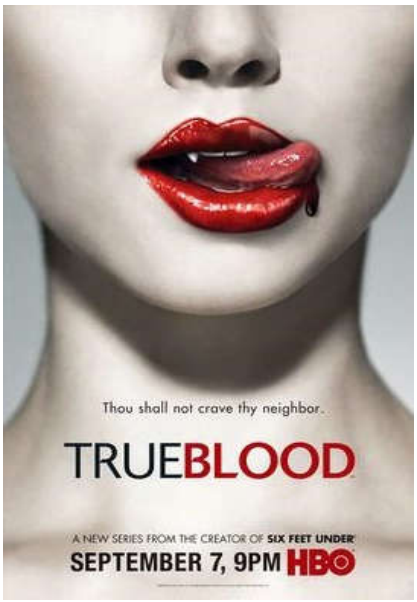
strengths and weaknesses just like the humans with whom they try to make society. This is made evident when readers and viewers have access to the vampires' human past, a story plot that is denied in *Dracula*. When Stoker chooses to write his story through an epistolary mode, and different viewpoints, he also decides to leave Dracula's perspective out of the narrative. The lack of evidence that the monster could have justifiable motives contributes for the idea that he lacks humanity, and therefore, he is ultimately evil. This idea can be so disturbing that in some adaptations of the novel, like Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), the director decided to grant the monster a human past, portraying Dracula as being capable of vengeance but also love. In contemporary works, the lack of a distinct line dividing good and evil complicates any kind of simple resolution for what is considered right or wrong. The audience does not have to pick a side between humans or vampires, but can rather choose their own villains and heroes from either species. Even more, readers and viewers are free to indulge in abandoning altogether the notion of villains and heroes. It is important to mention, however, that Harris' vampires can only be accepted because in her story Japanese scientists engineer synthetic blood, called Tru Blood, which made possible the Great Revelation, when vampires revealed their existence to the rest of the world. This means that the proximity between humans and vampires is feasible when the first are not always in the latter's menu, other than for recreational purposes and mutual consensus.

Figure 1 – *True Blood* 2001 Poster



Source: < https://www.hbo.com/true-blood/season-01>

In *Dracula*, Mina, a respectful young lady from the 19th century, fears she may become an evil monster, after the vampire contaminates her with his tainted blood. The familiarity detected in Count Dracula, this strange and appalling creature, by Mina and her fiancé Johnathan, for example, horrifies once these characters recognize they too can become monstrous. This familiarity found in the unknown is what Sigmund Freud defines as the uncanny. According to Freud, in "The Uncanny", this feeling "is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of

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repression" (FREUD, 1919, p. 13). Dracula, a creature whose existence defies nature, can only be perceived with strangeness by whoever meets him. He is not only a foreigner, but he is also an alien: different customs, appearance, and diet are some of his strange characteristics. Stoker's vampire, however, is capable of propelling in his victims the recognition of something familiar, i.e., of something monstrous within. In Harris' works, on the other hand, the reader is invited to a shocking realization: humans and vampires alike are capable of evil deeds. This realization conveys an even more straightforward message than *Dracula* does about humans' capability of monstrousness. A reflection of a century in which some consider to witness the degeneration of moral values, and in which religion no longer stands for what is sacred, *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* depicts a fantastic world where priests and fairies are as corrupt as vampires are. Harris' vampires are not uncanny because they are not strange enough, but are just too familiar.

In another vampire fiction work, the *Twilight Saga* (2005) by Mormon author Stephenie Meyer, we find a predator supposedly with a soul. Edward Cullen and his family are vampires who abdicate their natural survival needs and choose to prey upon animals instead of humans. Joyce Ann Mercer in "Vampires, Desire, Girls and God: Twilight and the Spiritualities of Adolescent Girls" (2010) writes,

> From mythic vampires' earlier incarnations as objects of (negative) fascination amidst horror, at least some of today' s vampires appear to have morphed into creatures of positive moral character and objects of romantic love (MERCER, 2010, p. 264).

Altogether good, Edward's family fight other vampires who are altogether evil. Religious values are again intertwined in this teenager bestseller's plot, with its message of love that waits, love that endures forever, and love that is pure. In *Twilight* we find a vampire that is even more troubled with moral concerns than the novel's human narrator. The fact that Edward insists in only having sexual intercourse with his human girlfriend after marriage coincides with the author's religious beliefs, as Stephenie Meyer is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The vampire's wedding has similar implications of a Mormon one, because both link the couple for eternity. Differently from an orthodox Christian marriage, where husband and wife are till death do them apart, for LDS, if man and woman are united in one of their temples, this union lasts for eternity, even after death, in heaven. Joseph Smith, the church's founder, wrote in *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835):

> If a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise, by him who is anointed, unto whom I have appointed this power and the keys of this priesthood, and…[they] abide in my covenant…[that marriage] shall be of full force when they are out of the world; …then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting. (D&C 132. p. 19-20)

Because Edward is a vampire, and his wife Isabella Swan is also transformed into one, their union is as immortal as they are. They can finally become "gods". Mercer continues,

> Meyer's narratives stand replete with religious themes, wrapped in the figures of sympathetic vampires concerned with morality who worry about the souls of others even as they wonder about the possibilities of redemption for themselves . . . in Twilight, relationships have a "fated" quality to them: not merely a matter of finding a willing mate, the LDS notion of an eternal

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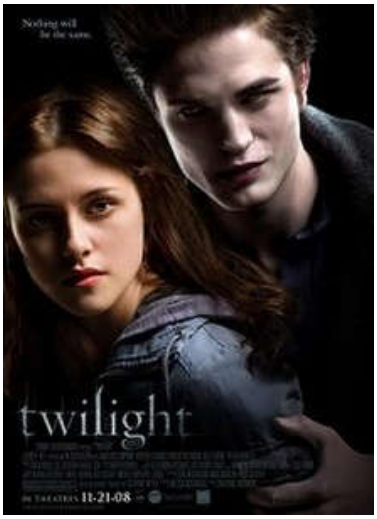
> marriage and family means that the stakes are high around finding a relationship with the partner one is intended to be with forever. (MERCER, 2010, p. 270)

When they have a daughter, a creature whose future is uncertain but seems to share her parents' immortality, their perfect Mormon scenario is complete, as they were successful in constituting an eternal family. As stated before, the plurality of beliefs and even disbeliefs in our own time allows a work with a pro-Christian scenario, like *Twilight*, and one that mocks religiosity, like *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, to become best-sellers.

Figure 2 – *Twilight* 2008 theatrical release poster



Source: <http://www.impawards.com/2008/posters/twilight_ver5.jpg>

Among other traits, one thing all these vampires, from the 19th to the 21st century, do have in common is that they are seductive beings. Purposefully or not, this characteristic is possibly their best asset. Even good-natured Edward warns Bella that she may be falling for his predator qualities that are deliberately meant to bring potential prey closer. "I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in—my voice, my face, even my smell. As if I need any of that!" (MEYER, 2005, p. 263-264). For Count Dracula, however, his seductiveness is not connected with a charming appearance, but with the power he is capable of exercising over others, and his ability to convince a victim to surrender, like he does with Lucy Westenra, Mina's friend who was turned into a vampire, and Renfield, a lunatic treated by one of Lucy's former suitors. Nevertheless, there are not only ugly vampires in *Dracula*. Lacking the kind of power that a male vampire is able to employ, the female vampires in Stoker's novel are seductive in a voluptuous and provocative way. Their sensuality is so overt for an era in which women had to be role models of respectfulness, that they seduce as much as terrify. Mina frowns upon her friend Lucy, Dracula's first female victim in England, because of Lucy's indecision in choosing a husband out of her three suitors. Lucy's indecision might indicate a promiscuous inclination in herself that she achieves when she becomes a vampire. Since women in the Victorian age were expected to be no less than perfect and pure, Mina's contact with Dracula is comparable to Eve's transgression in Eden, as both of their pure bodies become contaminated. The same cannot be said about the females who interact with vampires in the *Twilight Saga* and

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The Southern Vampire Mysteries: Bella is plain and naïve, but she shows a great sexual appetite that is not punished like Eve's transgression is, but is rather rewarded with the constitution of her perfect immortal family; and Sookie Stackhouse, the narrator of Harris' vampire series, is independent and strong-minded, which does not except her from trouble but does ensure she has a more thrilling life. Sookie opens her narrative with the following statement:

> I'D BEEN WAITING FOR THE VAMPIRE FOR YEARS WHEN HE walked into the bar. Ever since vampires came out of the coffin (as they laughingly put it) two years ago, I'd hoped one would come to Bon Temps. We had all the other minorities in our little town—why not the newest, the legally recognized undead? But rural northern Louisiana wasn't too tempting to vampires, apparently; on the other hand, New Orleans was a real center for them—the whole Anne Rice thing, right? (HARRIS, 2001, p. 1)

Her eagerness to meet a being potentially dangerous might be seen as a sign of foolishness, but as the story progresses the reader is invited to perceive her as rather courageous. It is also significant to mention how vampires are perceived by her as one of the many minorities already living in her town, which brings a certain naturality to her encounter.

A sign that seductiveness is inherent to vampires in the works mentioned is the women's transformation into ones. Lucy and Bella become prettier than they were in their mortal lives. Their vampire version is an improved, better looking and stronger being than the weak and sometimes boring humans they once were. The difference between Lucy and other subsequent vampires is the way the other characters in these works and even themselves face their transformation.

In Dracula, to become a vampire is something dreaded, a state that if ever wished for it has to be repressed and blamed on the count's craftiness and supernatural power over his victims. The contemporary vampire, however, here represented by the works of Harris and Meyer, causes envy, as their immortality is as appealing as their appearance. The prospect of becoming a vampire is no longer dreadful, because the vampire in the contemporary no longer provokes abjection, a term defined by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). For Kristeva (1982, p. 1), abjection "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects". Vampires who are essentially monsters like Dracula defy rules, which living beings are incapable of defying, by simply existing and resisting staying buried.

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.
>
> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 4)

Dracula defies rules because he is neither alive nor dead, he is in between, he is un-dead. An animated and soulless corpse, he disturbs natural order by moving, speaking, and interacting with others when he should no longer exist. He disturbs social order by engaging with women that are already possessed by other men. Edward, on the other hand, resembles if not a common teenager, not anything besides human, either. He does not prey on humans or neither disturbs

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social order, by accepting that his condition should remain a secret. Another distinction that can be made between Dracula and Edward is how other characters in the novels perceive them. In Stoker's novel, chapter two, Jonathan Harker describes Dracula's strong and aquiline face with peculiar arched nostrils, peculiar sharp white teeth, ears extremely pointed, and a general effect of extraordinary pallor. Jonathan also notes his host's hands, with hair in the center of the palm and nails cut sharp. The word choice Jonathan applies to describe Count Dracula reveals the strangeness with which the creature is perceived by the young lawyer. Jonathan comments, "As the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder. It may have been that his breath was rank, but a horrible feeling of nausea came over me, which, do what I could, I could not conceal" (19). Not knowing yet of the Count's nature, Jonathan explains in his journal his reaction against the vampire, or better, his abjection towards the vampire.

A reaction as the one Jonathan experiences towards Dracula in particular events, such as when he feels nauseated, is not expected from the characters of the other vampire works mentioned here. Jonathan's reaction goes even further than a feeling of the uncanny, i.e., he feels abjection. "Essentially different from 'uncanniness,' more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 5). For Jonathan, Dracula is not familiar: he does not throw a shadow nor does he have a reflection in a mirror as he was supposed to. Finally he is not even identified as a human being by Jonathan, who writes, "What manner of man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man?" (STOKER, 1897, p. 35). Edward Cullen and his vampire family cause a different reaction. When Bella first sees them she thinks,

> I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful—maybe the perfect blonde girl, or the bronze-haired boy. (MEYER, 2005, p. 19)

Even though Bella recognizes something potentially inhuman about their appearance, this recognition does not repel her and she is rather drawn to the way they look. Although vampires created after Stoker's monster seem to be situated, at some point, in relation to Dracula, they are a response of a different time period, and have their own ways of interacting with humans. When vampires do not look like corpses, humans may forget what Freud described as the fear of the dead. "Most likely our fear still contains the old belief that the deceased becomes the enemy of his survivor and wants to carry him off to share his new life with him" (FREUD, 1919, p. 14). In the 19th century, to share this new life with a vampire means a life of decay, condemnation and thirst for the blood of your once loved ones. Like the leper in the Old Testament the same rules are applied to Dracula and his creatures, "He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp." (Lev 13.46) This is also Mina's fate as long as she has the vampire disease, as the scar on her forehead inflicted by the Sacred Wafer indicates.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the literature of the 21st century, peace is made possible when vampires' abstain from their natural diet. When humans can interact with vampires without becoming "dinner", they are

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usually more open to establish a relationship. The vampires also have much more in common with human beings in contemporary works. In *Twilight*, they go to High School and play sports. In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* or *True Blood*, they can have a drink of synthetic blood in a small town bar and appear on television. The similarities between vampires and humans in contemporary works bring them together, and the few differences left contribute to charm mortals. If falling for a vampire in the 19th century was considered wrong and showed the weakness of the characters that caved, to have a relation with vampires now can prove one is adventurous and is willing to take risks.

Finally, religion is still present in contemporary vampire works, but not always its values are reinforced as it happens in *Dracula*. The plurality of beliefs, and disbeliefs, in our own time are reproduced in vampires because despite their uniqueness they still share with Dracula the ability to embody anxieties of their own time.

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