

Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

English (MA) Theses

Dissertations and Theses

Summer 8-2021

Fear Then and Now: The Vampire as a Reflection of Society

Mackenzie Phelps

Chapman University, phelp114@mail.chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_theses



Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Phelps, Mackenzie K. *Fear Then and Now: The Vampire as a Reflection of Society*. 2021. Chapman University, MA Thesis. *Chapman University Digital Commons*, <https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000287>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English (MA) Theses by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

FEAR THEN AND NOW: THE VAMPIRE AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIETY

A Thesis by

Mackenzie K. Phelps

Chapman University

Orange, California

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

August 2021

Committee in charge

Dr. Justine VanMeter

Dr. Ian Barnard

Dr. Lynda Hall

The thesis of Mackenzie K. Phelps is approved



Dr. Justine Van Meter



Dr. Ian Barnard



Dr. Lynda Hall

June 2021

FEAR THEN AND NOW: THE VAMPIRE AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIETY

Copyright © 2021

by Mackenzie K. Phelps

ABSTRACT

FEAR THEN AND NOW: THE VAMPIRE AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIETY

by Mackenzie K. Phelps

Over the expanse of centuries, human society has created *monsters* in order to give a physical form to their abstract fears. Society has gone from speaking of them in oral traditions to watching them on a screen in more recent decades, but the written works of these monstrosities have occurred in the multitudes across multiple eras. The globalized monster I have chosen to focus on here is the *vampire*. Said vampires are witnessed as changing over time to adjust to the awakening or loss of certain human fears, distresses, and perceived threats—whether that be war, religion, race, etc. While the basic pillars of their image remain similar to their predecessors, the vampires of now have greatly evolved outside of the monster’s stereotyped performance and role in human society. What this work aims to accomplish is a comparison between different eras of the vampire literary lineage and how these vampires represent the fears—or sometimes the unspoken desires—of that human generation. Within this paper I will be examining six vampire novels, three of the past and three of more current times. For each novel, I will showcase how that book’s formation of the vampire character mirrors particular devices of fear within that space. I want to draw a comparison to reveal the evolution of not only the vampire monster but fear itself

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
WAR AND PASSION: VAMPIRES PRIOR TO THE 2000's	7
RACE AND ILLNESS: VAMPIRES IN THE POST-2000's ERA	16
CONCLUSION	25
WORK CITED	26

Introduction

With the rise of human societies came the rise of the *monster*. Each civilization, each era of humanity has brought with them mythical creatures or mystic beings which have served a specific purpose. There have been gods who move the sun around the world to bring forth the day, and goddesses who swim across the sky to form the night. There have been myths about beings roaming the earth and sea to describe misunderstood sights and events of the past. Prior to the multitude of discoveries about the inner and outer workings of this worldly system we exist in, people needed a way to make the unknown known. They wanted to know how humans as well as the flora and the fauna came into fruition, how the plains and mountains and rivers appeared. They wanted to know why volcanoes erupted and why the tides changed and why sometimes the sun disappeared.

For all the negative things they didn't understand, people made monsters to blame. Miscarriages were the result of spiteful trickster spirits or demons; Near Eastern and European folklore blamed Abyzou (or Obizuth), a female demon who brought death to infants out of envy caused by her own infertility. Mentally ill people had demonic forces puppeteering their minds; religious persons in the Middle Ages would perform exorcisms on the mentally distressed as demonic possession was a way to explain their erratic/abnormal behaviors. Rotting harvests and ill animals were the result of improper guarding from troublesome ghoulish beings; the breath of the Nuckelavee of Orcadian mythology was thought to wilt crops and sicken livestock. These malevolent deities were the scourge of the earth, for those who believed in them, and the reason behind almost any ailment, inconvenience, or disaster. One such monster I will be focusing on is the

vampire. The common conjuration of a vampire is a thin fanged pale undead humanoid creature who preys on the global population, consuming their blood, and sometimes their flesh, in an attempt to quench their endless thirst. However, in truth, the image, abilities, and behaviors of the vampire shift from place to place and time to time to reflect that specific human society.

The human race has many deplorable and disturbing ideologies and qualities. However, they are often suppressed, buried in history, or unconsciously ignored as being an issue out of this need to retain this concept that we are *superior*—more than mere evolved animals. It is through the creation of monsters, such as the vampire, that we are able to conceptualize our own monstrous tendencies, able to witness our darkness reflected back at us from within the faces of fanged beasts. In the shadows of literature and myth the truth lurks, waiting to seize our attention and attack us with our flaws—*our fears*. We *fear* the reality of human society. We *fear* to admit that we are fallible, *fear* to admit we are prejudiced, selfish, and cruel. It is through monsters that we give life to our imperfections, mistakes, and injustices, and can vicariously defeat these faults and fears. It is also through monsters that people are able to recognize their shortcomings, as well as those of others, and possibly inspire them to be better than the monster, be better than the fear. The vampire acts as a mirror of these fears. As Steven Kimberley writes in his article “A Psychological Analysis of the Vampire Myth”: The “vampire myth has always been the subject of fear – a characterization of a primal fear of emotions within the human unconscious...” (43). This creature, like many others, can be witnessed as an embodiment of the divergent thoughts concerning gender, sexuality, race, class, and ethnicity. In the chapter “Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity”

of her book *Skin Shows*, Judith Halberstam suggests that they are *meaning machines* that can be programmed and reformulated by the given society to represent their unconscious or even conscious fears of humanity (21-22). Kimberley references psychologist Frederic Barlett in his article, stating that:

...as a result of schemas (a psychological element of memory in which your own societal expectations create a bias upon recollection), stories and myths can be gradually altered over time. The result of reconstructive memory is that factors may be 'edited' in order to better suit the social expectations and values of the society in which the myth is being told. (38-39)

The basic model of the vampire is recycled and built upon throughout various eras to emulate the things labeled as *threats* to that current society. Homosexuality/queerness, rich foreigners, foreign invasion, and religions outside of Christianity are a handful of repetitive traits attributed to vampires.

The vampire can be observed across a wide variety of mediums: oral traditions, art, poetry, songs, movies, tv shows, and, of course, literature: "Throughout the span of its existence, the vampire myth has survived in different manifestations because of its powerful psychological significance to the human mind. Its numerous purposes and countless variations means that the vampire myth remains immensely popular in modern culture" (Kimberley 44). Vampires first became popular among the masses with the publication of classics such as Joseph Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and films like *Nosferatu*. Then, vampires were the *incarnation of evil and sin*, one of the supreme villains of fiction taken from centuries of folklore. Today, vampires have

donned a slightly different appearance. We have television shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *True Blood*—modeled after Charlaine Harris’s book series *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, as well as books like Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles* and Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga. Vampires have been romanticized and, in a way, humanized in the modern age of fiction. Nina Auerbach explains in her book *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, that since “vampires are immortal, they are free to change incessantly. Eternally alive, they embody not fear of death, but fear of life: their power and their curse is their undying vitality. From Varney to Dracula..., from Chelsea Quinn Yarbro’s disenchanting idealist, Count Saint-Germain, to Lestat and his friends...” (5). They remain *monsters* but have evolved to fit in with today’s fascination with said vampires. In response to this cultural shift, the monstrous aspects of the vampire have shifted to showcase what this generation fears now: war and conquest, the loss of individual passion, racial prejudice, or disease and contagions.

The vampire exists across various cultures and acts as mirrors of those culture’s popular attitudes and opinions. Kristen Stevens, in the article “Conformity Through Transgression: The Monstrous Other and Virtual Vampires,” states: “In a literal interpretation, vampires are representatives of the fears of the cultures which produce them” (19). A form of the vampire exists across centuries as portrayals of popular culture scripts and schemas; popular culture, according to John Edgar Browning in “Horror and the Gothic’s Utility as a Cultural Resource and Critical Tool,” being the “customs, events, artifacts, myths, languages, etc. which are shared by the masses” (2). Browning goes on to explain:

Indeed, it is the very genericalness of popular culture which prompts [scholars] to believe it is more than just the selling and consuming of products: that popular culture is, in fact, capable of reflecting values, opinions, feelings, and the patterns of thought generally understood and circulated by significant portions of the cultures or nations in which these values, opinions, feelings, and patterns occur. (2)

Thus, if we relate the vampiric as part of a given society's popular culture, we can then seek further correlation between vampire figures and the given ideologies and emotions governing a specific era of humanity. In her article "Vampires Among Us," Linda Heidenreich reenforces this claim by affirming that: "Popular culture uses vampiric discourse to voice fear of change, fear of the other, fear that the other is bringing change to our communities" (93).

I will be examining Marie Nizet's *Captain Vampire* (1879), George Sylvester Viereck's *The House of the Vampire* (1907), Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling* (2005), as well as Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's *The Strain* (2009), and how each book echoes particular fears of its era of publication. Nizet illustrates the fears of a specific historical episode wherein the Romanian people were forced to battle during one of the many gruesome wars that was brought to their borders. She captures the atrocity and inhuman treatment of the nation by subjecting her characters to the cruelty of the *inhuman* vampire, a beast who represents the hideous nature of their true enemy—the Russian Empire. Viereck touches a time closer to our own, the *roaring twenties*, and crafts his vampiric creation to mirror a more psychological than physical fear. His concept showcases the prevailing anxiety at the time which was for a person to be

without that creative *spark*, to be without inspiration or individual identity; his vampire sinks its fangs into the psyche and torments the soul. Butler turns her pen on the fears surrounding racial prejudice, still holding on regardless of the other social advancements being made in the world, by depicting a conflict between a centuries-long all white vampiric race and a young vampire who due to biological experimentation is black-skinned. Her *mixed blood* is witnessed by the purist vampires as a *sin* and they thus determine that she must be destroyed before she can pass on her corruption to her lineage in the future. Del Toro and Hogan interweave a story that combines the monstrosity of the vampire and human society's mounting fear of an apocalyptic disease outbreak, interpreting vampirism *as* the disease. They enable us to view disease as a physical villainous entity to wage war against; they transform illness into a creature that can be touched—can be killed, but also show how disease is a powerful force that can overwhelm and destroy humanity.

Vampires are bodies of corruption, of aberration and the unorthodox, of the unsightly and unusual. The vampiric are the conception of an anti-self. Society takes the self, the body that is most desirable—a white heterosexual male for instance—and casts the vampire as a being in defiance of that desired form. “produce the perfect figure for negative identity. [Vampires] have to be everything the human is not” and produce “the negative of human” (Halberstam 22). Whichever traits are admired or conceptualized as *proper* in human beings; the vampire must encapsulate the opposite. They are “lumpen bodies, bodies pieced together out of the fabric of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (3). They This creature exist beyond the mundane; they are the dangerous and forbidden, the

taboo. It is through the examination of monsters that society can bear witness to its own monstrous nature.

War and Passion: Vampires Prior to the 2000's

During the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, Russia led a coalition consisting of several nations against the Ottoman Empire. One of said nations under the control of Russia was Romania; and it was under this command that multitudes of Romanian soldiers were sent into the field to be slaughtered. Teresa Goddu references Auerbach in her piece "Vampire Gothic," citing that vampires "change according to their time: '[E]ach feeds on his age distinctively because he embodies that age' (1). The vampire reflects national moods and, hence, tells us who we are" (129-130). "When the dominant culture fears change, fears its children are out of control, fears its culture is under attack, it makes use of the vampire motif. As a representation of an outside threat among us, the vampire allows a dominant culture to articulate and contain cultural threats" (Heidenreich 92). Marie Nizet, author of *Captain Vampire*, captures the collective fear as well as the hatred the dominant Romanian culture held toward the entering Russian forces. Nizet's vampire can then be understood to symbolize the danger the nation felt as Russia ensnared them into a war they did not have a reason to fight in. Romania's way of life and the lives of its people were at risk as these foreign monsters invaded their borders.

Marie Nizet, while not directly connected to the war, was well-acquainted with Rumanians (i.e. Romanians) "Euphrosyna and Virgilia Radulescu, the daughters of the late writer and fervently anti-Russian political agitator Ion Heliade Radulescu (1802-1872)" (Stableford 6). It was through them that Nizet gained her knowledge and opinions about the Russo-Turkish and was thus inspired to write the novel. The Radulescu

daughters portrayed Rumania's involvement in the war as mere *pawns* of Russia's imperial greed. According to them, the Rumanian troops and battalions were *tin soldiers*, exhaustible human shields that were sent out to pave the way for their Russian abusers to march upon on their path to victory. *Captain Vampire* utilizes, in particular, the capture of the Gravitza (i.e. Grivitza) Redoubt as a fulcrum for the entire story wherein "several regiments of the Rumanian army were ordered by their Russian commander-in-chief to lead a dangerous assault that had a tremendous cost in human lives" (Stableford 7). Rumanian lives. Nizet captures the fears, as well as the anger and resentment, which Rumanians felt toward their Russian rulers.

The story mainly follows Rumanian soldier Ioan Isacescu. Assigned to be part of the regiment to march on Gravitza, he must leave behind his love Mariora Slobozianu as well as his father, both who have been targeted by Colonel Boris Liatoukine—aka "Captain Vampire." Swearing to avenge the shameful behaviors brought upon those he cares about, Ioan sets out for Gravitza. While on the war path, Ioan has an encounter with the Colonel that leaves him under the impression that Mariora cheated on him with Liatoukine. Ioan, now gone numb from a broken heart, marches on like a true "tin soldier," empty and ruthless. During the battle for the Gravita Redoubt, Ioan utilizes the chaos of it all to get Liatoukine alone. He proceeds to stab him thrice and then gets shot himself, leaving the fate of the Colonel somewhat uncertain. Waking up in an infirmary, Ioan is told that Liatoukine is truly dead. Relieved, he journeys back to Bucharest, although he is determined never to set eyes on Mariora again. Of course, they meet and Mariora explains that Ioan was manipulated by Liatoukine and she is innocent. The

couple marries, seemingly living their *happily ever after*, when one day they pass a wedding and are shocked and horrified when the groom turns out to be Liatoukine.

Ioan in *Captain Vampire* is the embodiment of Rumania. He is described as displaying “all the distinctive features of his race” (Nizet 22). His appearance “would have drawn from any Serb, Russian, Bulgar or Hungarian the possibly hostile and disdainful exclamation: ‘There’s a Rumanian!’” (22). As such, his suffering and tribulations during the novel are meant to reflect the experience of *all* Rumanian soldiers, as well as a majority of the common people, during the Russo-Turkish war. Controlled by the Russian imperial army, Rumanians were treated as sacrificial lambs sent to be slaughtered by the troops of the Ottoman Empire. Rumanians went to war knowing, yet still fearing that death would come their way soon. They had little hope of surviving or making it back home unscathed. Rumanians at the time were also afraid that Russians, the elite of the elite at the time, would come in and steal away all their women. The Russians present in Rumania treated the nation’s women as “their slaves,” sexual creatures who should bend to the will. They demanded they dance, sing, and lay with them, as was their considered right as Russian men. Not only does Ioan go forth into war and become mentally and physically traumatized, he also at one point “loses his woman” to the Russians. He, as Rumania, is stripped of his dignity and his love. He, as Rumania, is left shattered by the wrath of the Russians.

If Ioan is Rumania, then Boris Liatoukine is Russia. This “Captain Vampire” is the epitome of cruelty, a sinister force that raked his way across the nation. He is witnessed as “the legendary type-specimen of the Slavic vampire. His figure, unusually long and thin, projected an enormous shadow behind him, which merged with the

darkness of the ceiling” (32). Liatoukine had a *funereal aspect*, “fleshless hands” and a “livid parlor” to his inhumanly stern face. “The eyes, which seemed the only living things in that impassive face, displayed a singular feature: each eyeball, iridescent as a topaz, had a vertically slit pupil...” (33). He is a demon incarnate—the vampire. Several aspects of his being are attached to his vampiric nature. His appearance is obvious, however he also apparently possesses the ability to be *ubiquitous*, to be everywhere at once. “Captain Vampire” was left stranded and thought frozen to death, only to meet his mutinous battalion back at camp and lively enough to execute them all. Ioan fatally spilt his blood and still Liatoukine resurrected. “Captain Vampire,” too, is rumored to display the more commonly known trait of the vampire—consuming blood—as the two women he married died under mysterious circumstances within weeks and months. One of Liatoukine’s men stating: “It was whispered abroad that the two women had been strangled and that they both bore a little red mark on the neck—vampire’s teeth, you know...” (31).

Each aspect of “Captain Vampire” reflects the monstrosity that Rumanian’s idealized Russia to be. Russia was “everywhere at once,” there was no escaping their control or their brutality. The Russian imperial forces dominated Rumania with little to no care for Rumanian lives, condemning them to being puppets for Russia’s conquest as “Captain Vampire” is puppet master of Ioan’s battalion. This inconsiderate puppeteering is distinctly witnessed when “Captain Vampire” forces Ioan and his fellow Rumanian on a suicide mission as the first wave of soldiers in the storming of the Gravitza. Furthermore, Liatoukine’s marriages could be understood as a representation of the alliance between Russia and Rumania. Both bonds forged in contact, Liatoukine drained the life force from his wives as Russia drained resources and lives from Rumania. At one

point, Ioan confesses he is no longer astonished by the “inhuman proceedings” of Russians. Nizet therefore draws a synonymous connection between *inhuman* and Russia. Russia *is* Liatoukine, *is* the vampire, the great beast orchestrating the death of thousands.

Rumanians feared Russia’s supremacy and wrathful disposition during this horrifying period of war. Nizet created *Captain Vampire* to capture that fear, to give a truly monstrous face to the monstrous ilk who she believed haunted and tormented the Rumanian nation for the sake of Russian imperial ambition. That, “at least, was the way that Ion Heliade Radulescu’s indignant daughters presented the event to their friend Marie Nizet...” (Stableford16). The vampire monster Nizet wove had the purpose of exposing the horror of real events: the war, the sacrifice, the cold-heartedness of imperial Russia, the death and destruction.

Unlike the bloodiness and devastation that Nizet’s work was steeped in, George Sylvester Viereck’s *The House of the Vampire* is set in the early twentieth century of New York City, when the city was elevating itself from the end of the nineteenth century to embrace the culture of Bohemianism—a glorious time for artists of every medium. New York City has been a central location for artistic and popular culture gathering for decades. Various actors, poets, playwrights, musicians, and literary giants have at flocked to the city at one point or another to share their artistic dreams and creations. It was a time for passion and color and vibrancy of the souls of people. However, if one lacked this *passion*—whether it be for mathematics or painting or lyrics—then they were considered the “lower lifeforms” of society. People lived under pressure and in constant fear that if they didn’t or couldn’t produce something “grandiose” in their lifetime, their life had no value. If they couldn’t present pieces of utter uniqueness to the masses, those

masses were liable to turn their back and move on to the next best thing. People without passion were fated to fade into obscurity behind the blinding brilliance of those who enthralled, entertained, and enraptured their audiences. “Because [vampires] are always changing, their appeal is dramatically generational” (Auerbach 5). A vampire’s specific form must then, of course, convey something about the cultural anxieties of the contextual generation. Hence, the vampire in Viereck’s novella must appropriate the fears and conditions of the set era of society: the power of individuality, the opulence of independent creation, the essentialism of passion.

The premise of *The House of the Vampire* is that Ernest Fielding, a budding and partially well-known poet and writer, is invited by Reginald Clarke—the “master” of the arts—to stay with him in hopes of “nurturing his gift.” During his stay, Ernest finds he doesn’t have the strength to actually physically produce the work he is conspiring in his head. He is shocked when Reginald reads a manuscript at a party that practically plagiarizes the play that Ernest had been imaging in detail for weeks. This bout of confused madness, which he at the time thought couldn’t be logically possible, induces Ernest to spend time at the seashore to recuperate his nerves. There, he comes across Ethel Brandenburg, an ex-lover of Reginald, and she realizes that something is afoot between Reginald and Ernest. After Ernest returns to the house, Ethel confronts Reginald and he admits he is stealing Ernest’s creative thoughts through psychic powers. Ethel retells the story to Ernest, who chooses to confront Reginald. The confrontation takes a disastrous turn when Reginald steals from Ernest his very being—his soul, his essence, leaving him nothing more than a hollow shell of a man.

This era of humanity largely focused on the importance as well as value in an individual's *intellectual independence*. Vampires “serve as effective barometers in the hands of popular culturists as measuring, even predicting collective sentiments and cultural trends and anxieties” (Browning 2). In this case, one of the most prominent cultural *anxieties* of the portrayed time was the loss of individuality. During the novel, Viereck repeatedly compares a person's individuality, their *essence* if one will, to colors. These colors are what craft the individuality of said person. It's their *spark*, that piece of themselves that can be honed and emblazoned within one's work. People can be, and often are, the carriers of more than one color.

A man's soul, like the chameleon, takes colour from its environment.

(Viereck 6)

“...Passion may grip us by the throat momentarily; upon our backs we may feel the lashes of desire and bathe our souls in the flames of many hues...” (14)

“...It was a certain something, a rich colour effect, perhaps. And then, under your very eyes, the colour that vanished from your canvases reappeared in my prose.” (35)

“I absorb. I appropriate. That is the most any artist can say for himself. God creates; man moulds. He gives us the colours; we mix them.”

(53)

Sparks, blue, crimson and violet, seemed to play around the living battery. It reaches the fibres of his mind.... ..All that was stored in his brain-cells came forth to be absorbed by that mighty engine.... (54)

Viereck's *psychic vampire* doesn't consume blood, but rather is “all brain...only brain...a tremendous brain-machine” (54) that has the ability to absorb the “colors” of people. Whatever makes an individual a “great mind,” Reginald takes into himself in order to “complete himself,” because a “man's genius is commensurate with his ability of absorbing from life the elements essential to his artistic completion” (7). He exists under the delusion that it is his destiny to “concentrate the dispersed rays of a thousand lesser luminaries in one singing flame that, like a giant torch, lights up humanity's path” (35). He thinks himself to be a messiah of God and that it is his duty to be “the master-figure of the age;” (36) that he carries “the essence of what is cosmic...of what is divine...” (54).

Reginald is the “terrors,” “nightmares,” and “monsters” of the old days, of shallow skepticism from the nineteenth century, “come back in a modern guise” (43). He embezzles the *motives*, the colorful “plumes” of creativity found in other artists works and implants them into his own to make them more exquisite. Reginald began his life as a “dull” boy, without any real color of his own. Upon discovering that he could reap

brilliance from those around him, he was quick to pluck the most beautiful feathers from their plumage. He reaches into his chosen victim's minds and plucks at their strongest *chords of the soul*. These chords contain a person's talents and person who has had their talent, their passion stum dry, their value in society—their strength to live—is decimated. According to Reginald, there “is some principal prisoned in [people's] souls, which, when escaped, leaves them insipid, unprofitable and devoid of interest to us” (33). The psychic vampire Viereck conjured is indeed a heinous creature for those of this predominantly artistic society whose purpose was tethered to the potency and aptitude of their minds.

“The smile of Reginald Clarke was the smile of a conqueror” (1). He was to grow “into the mightiest literary factor of the century by preying on his betters” (52). Reginald showcases not only the danger and horror that come with having an insatiable ambition, but he is also, almost laughably, the living personification of “artist's block.” He is the grim reaper of passions, a beast of greed that plunders individuals' minds for thoughts and casts them as his own. People of the twentieth century depended on their intellectual property, their sheer talent to rise beyond the streets of the common folk. Their greatest fear was losing that passion, was of becoming a mere empty vessel walking through life without essence—without *color*. So, a monster that could forcefully seize those things from them is the epitome of evil. For what fear is more potent, more devastating to a person than living without motive? What is the point of life if there is no color in your mind, in your eyes, in your heart? To exist as a barren being, as such was the fate of Ernest Fielding, is to not exist at all. This is the fear of the creative soul.

Race and Illness: Vampires in the Post-2000 Era

The twenty-first century is meant to stand as the crux of humanity's development—technologically, scientifically, economically, socially, etc. And yet there are negative aspects of the past that are still in existence. One of the most prolific and historically recorded being *racism*. “Race” is a social construct, a systematic differentiation between populations of different social and cultural ancestry under the guise of *biological* distinction. In the United States of America, specifically, there is a constant divide drawn between people of “white” and “black” skin. Octavia E. Butler utilizes her novel *Fledgling* to showcase this racism in the U.S. Through the more acceptable gaze of fiction, because the reality of racism is heavily debated in the nation, Butler reveals the monstrous nature of racial prejudice by transposing these ideologies onto bodies we already recognize as “monsters”—the vampire.

One of the heaviest cultural traumas to darken American history books, as well as other global historical records, began with the concept of race. White settlers believed, such as some white Ina examined later believe, that an individual's *blackness* corresponded to a lack of value or humanity. Timothy Robinson, in his literary piece “Octavia Butler's Vampiric Vision,” discusses how Auerbach “proclaims that ‘every age embraces the vampire it needs’ (1995, 145). Her observation [is] that vampires are an ever-changing archetype reflecting social concerns and anxieties of the particular generation it derives from...” (61). Robinson goes on to say that: “if we examine the prevalence of vampire mythology in various European and American cultures across time, discourse about vampires often materializes in historical moments where there is a need to explain the unknown or to rationalize momentous events in human history when

collective cultural trauma exists” (66). *Fledgling* presents the collective concern of many of the current culture’s citizens about the destructive consequences of widespread racism. Butler, from an analytic standpoint, created her novel as a window into the negative ideologies surrounding *black blood* and how said ideologies effect those persecuted by the prejudice of race.

Fledgling is the story of Shori Matthews, a genetic experiment wherein the human DNA of a black woman was integrated with that of the Ina (i.e. the vampires). This resulted in her being born dark skinned and thus allowed her to be less vulnerable against the Ina’s susceptibility to the effects of the day. Awoken with amnesia, Shori is the lone survivor of a mysterious fire that destroyed half of her family. Upon gaining contact with the other half and learning who and what she is, she loses them to another unexplainable fire. Together with her symbionts—humans that the Ina form symbiotic relationships—Shori discovers that the fires were assassination attempts on her life because some of the Ina “decided there shouldn’t be a new, improved model” (Butler 120). They believed that by combining Ina and human DNA, that Shori was not, in fact, Ina but rather a type of *abomination*. Shori, as the last of her departed siblings who were also genetic experiments, has to struggle for her right to proclaim that she is Ina, that her skin and heritage does not make her *less than* the “white” vampire community.

The Ina share a great many traits with the average depiction of a vampire: burning in the sun, nocturnal, consuming blood, mild mind control abilities, and, in particular, their appearance. Throughout *Fledging*, the Ina are repeatedly described as blonde tall lean pale beings with often lighter colored eyes. One can assume, then, that the Ina act as a representation of the common white individual. Shori herself can be understood, in

human society terms, as *mulatto*—a person born from one white and one black parent. And as with the U.S., mulatto families are not readily accepted by all and sometimes considered by the more combative members of society as a “mixed breed,” as though the people were *animals*. This is the ideology on which the conflict of the novel is built upon. This societal war between the *purists*, the bigots and those of a tolerant ethics is played out on the pages between the Ina families against Shori’s creation and those who idealize her to be the solution to their weakness, to be a new strength.

After the assassination attempts, Shori seeks out another Ina family that her father told her were allies, the Gordons. It is while at the Gordon’s compound that they work to unravel the reasoning behind the extermination plot against Shori. There is a moment where Wright, Shori’s first symbiont, suggests that “it’s happening because Shori is black, and racists—probably Ina racists—don’t like the idea that a good part of the answer to your daytime problems is melanin” (147). Melanin being the pigment in the skin that makes it darker. Of course, the Gordons defended that “the Ina weren’t racists.... Human racism meant nothing to the Ina because human races meant nothing to them” (148). Or so they would like to believe. It is revealed, however, when another attempt is made on Shori’s life and they capture one of the assassins to question his motives on why he wants to kill them.

He surprised me. “Dirty little nigger bitch,” he said reflexively. “Goddamn mongrel cub.” Then he gasped and clutched his head between his hands.

After a moment, he put his head down on the table and groaned.

It was clear he was in pain. His face had suddenly gone a deep red.

“Didn’t mean to say that,” he whispered. “Didn’t mean to call you that.” He looked at me. “Sorry. Didn’t mean it.”

“They call me those things, don’t they?”

He nodded.

“Because I’m dark-skinned?”

“And human,” he said. “Ina mixed with some human or maybe human mixed with a little Ina. That’s not supposed to happen. Not ever. Couldn’t let you and you...your kind...your family...breed.” (173)

These opinions were implanted into the assassin’s brain, told to him by *them*. Them being the Ina family who brainwashed the attackers and ordered them to burn down the Gordon compound and Shori’s family—the Silks. A “purist” family that, obviously, thought that the mixture of human and Ina DNA, let alone *black* human DNA that “erased” part of their Ina heritage, was a crime against the Ina community. Following this exposure of suspected criminal acts, the Silks are brought to trial before a Council of Ina. During this trial the phrase “We are Ina” is said again and again. This is what Shori must defend, that *she is Ina*. The Silks proclaim that her “mixed blood,” her dark skin establishes her as not Ina, as not an act of scientific brilliant but as a *smear* on their society. In outrage, one of the Silks proclaims: “You’re not [Ina]! And you have no more business at this Council than a clever dog” (238). The conflict the Silks have with Shori can be then understood not to be the dislike of “one-individual-to-another” but as “man-to-animal” (239). They judge her human genetics and therefore her dark-skinned

disposition as so degrading to the Ina lineage that she is an *animal*—is less that Ina *and* human. An ally of the Silks during the trial goes so far as to say:

“...You are their descendant, but because of their error, because of their great error, you are not Ina! No one can be certain of the truth of anything you say because you are neither Ina nor human. Your scent, your reactions, your facial expressions, your body language—none of it is right. ...We are Ina. You are nothing!” (272)

Through *Fledging* the reader is able to bear witness to one of the greatest fears of some of today’s human society; that the underlying currents and remnants of racism will mark those of a darker skin, those of *mixed* blood as *less than human*—as animals and savages. People are afraid that society will fall back on cruel and unreasonable ideologies, and that the people under siege by those ideologies will be hunted and annihilated for their difference. One of the Ina on the Council refers to human racial prejudice as a *weed* that need not grow. While this *weed* has been cultivated in reduced quantities in recent decades, it has not been uprooted or destroyed in totality across the nation. It is a looming beast in the shadows waiting for the opportune moment to consume its victims. It is the boogeyman of our society, the creature we fear is always around the corner or outside our front doors. Racism is the monster that never dies, but instead lives on as part of the hearts of the intolerant masses.

The racist ideology still prevalent in modern society and reflected in *Fledging* can be witnessed as a disease of the mind, but vampires can also represent literal sickness. “To pry only a little deeper into the fears which the figure of the vampire embodies, we see the extension of our fears of the dead through an association of the

vampiric with the spread of contagion and the pain of disease...” (Stevens 19). Probably the most relevant fear in the U.S. is the fear of illness, of pathogens and viruses that infect and assault the human body. In the last century alone there have been episodes of mass illness including typhoid fever, multiple influenza outbreaks (the Swine flu, Spanish flu, and Avian flu to name a few), the hantavirus, the polio disease, SARS, and the HIV and AIDS epidemics. Yet, the year 2020 will live on in infamy as one of the deadliest pandemics to sweep the nation. For our generation it will be the “coronavirus,” which leads to the disease COVID-19, that we will remember swallowing the population into a pit of fear. We are afraid to touch or be touched because a single touch has the possibility to sentence us to six feet under. Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s book *The Strain* fuses together our fear of disease and our fear of monsters to create a vision of the panic and apocalyptic results that come with a virus. The vampire virus.

The story begins with a plane full of dead passengers, no rhyme or reason behind their sudden synchronized demise. Ephraim “Eph” Goodweather is the head of a specialized unit of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention called the “Canary project.” He and his colleague Nora Martinez are sent to investigate the seemingly unexplainable deaths and begin to suspect that the situation goes beyond normal human comprehension. They discover that whatever killed the passengers is a viral disease that is transforming the dead into the undead. Eph and Nora, as well as the companions they gather throughout the novel, then must learn not only how to destroy those who are infected but how to save the entire nation from falling prey to this outbreak which has been coordinated by “the Master,” an ancient vampire who wants to bring about humanity’s end.

Del Toro uses his novel as a literary platform to introduce his vampiric creatures as *symbols* of contagion. Indeed, the vampires found in *The Strain* are unlike preconceived notions of this monster and are a grotesque representation of the living fear in human beings in face of mass illness and nearly uncontrollable infection. Victoria Nelson suggests in her novel, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*, how del Toro is referencing “the Mexican folklore traditions of *alejibres*, made-up creatures drawn from the individual artisan’s own imagination, del Toro describes his movies [and other works] as ‘my own personal bestiaries of fanciful creatures.’ The compilations of fantastic creatures found in medieval bestiaries, he stresses, were important for their ‘cosmological, symbolic and spiritual meanings,’ and it is this deeper significance that he wants his creatures to carry” (223). Del Toro is seemingly able to connect centuries of disease by having an ancient evil, the original infected—ground zero, unleash the parasitic vampire disease onto modern civilization. Thus, the reader can interpret that *illness* is an inescapable reality for it will always come around again, stronger and more devastating each time.

The vampires of *The Strain* universe, like many readapted monsters, are similar to their mythical predecessors. They drink blood, extinguish in the sun, can be killed by silver, and live underground. However, del Toro and Hogan have reimagined vampirism as a biological virus rather than a supernatural force. The “vampire virus” is conducted by the reproduction of a “capillary parasite” in the infected. This parasite, this *blood worm* “mimics the host’s form, though it reinvents its viral systems in order to best sustain itself. In other words, it colonizes and adapts the host for its survival” (del Toro and Hogan 218). Thus, the infected person becomes neither dead nor alive. They are

being “possessed” by the blood worm to serve out the worm’s instincts: feed, shelter, reproduce. The virus is also described in *The Strain* as a “dark, cancerous blight” as it acted much “like a cancerous growth,” absorbing other internal tissue of the hosts to form what it needed. It took the respiratory system and manipulated the flesh into a projectile stinger that could attach to their victim’s necks and other areas of large blood sources to consume. It broke and molded the human body until they were no longer human.

“The virus overwhelmed and transformed the cell—just as the vampire overwhelmed and transformed the victim. These vampires were viruses incarnate” (277). This statement echoes the focal point of the novel. The vampires *are* disease. They are “walking pathogens,” “humanoid diseases” ready to infect society at large. These nearly unstoppable beings spread the vampire parasite from host to host, a grotesque blossom of blood and carnage that blooms quickly across the islands of New York City. Unprepared for something this catastrophic and advanced, Eph and his team are blind-sided and left absolutely helpless to stop the viral epidemic before its momentum reached rapidity and hordes of vampires are emerging. A bible excerpt appears in the novel that prophesizes the outcome of the outbreak:

A passage was underlined in red ink with a shaky hand, Revelations 11:7-

8:

...the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit will make war upon them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which is allegorically called Sodom... (320)

The vampire virus epidemic in *The Strain* mirrors almost every viral outbreak we've experienced in the U.S. Each time we seem to be *overwhelmed* by the disastrous capacities of the virus at hand. And each time we grow more fearful of what is to come because we cannot imagine how it could be worse than before. These viruses and epidemics we face *feel* as though they are trying to “conquer” us. We wage war against the diseases, fight them with chemicals and radiation and holistic juices. If only we could cure them with silver and sun.

The novel also seems to suggest something even greater—the *human race* is a disease. The Master, who is the dark spirit of a supreme vampire in the body of a man once known as Jusef Sardu, allies himself with a human so that he can release the vampire virus unchecked onto the U.S. He implies that human beings are “pigs,” that our “kind is the epidemic—not [his]” (307). I think this can be observed as an allusion to the fact that humanity is a blight on the world. Humanity acts like “pigs,” consuming the world. We tear down nature to build freeways and skyscrapers and factories; we pollute the seas, skies, and land; we are a cancer of the Earth, slowly killing the planet as we quickly and infinitely expand our population. Humans, too, are vampiric in nature. We ravish and rampage our way across the world, spreading the human race. *We* conquer and kill and make war. What is the difference between the nature of humanity and the vampire? Are we not both beings that endlessly consume? Do we not both believe, at least in the context of the novel, that the other is the monster?

Del Toro and Hogan have managed to capture the fear as well as the reality of disease in the twenty-first century. It is dangerous—monstrous. It is immortal, for disease will continue to live on in our literal bodies, or in our memories, because it will continue

to evolve and adapt such as *The Strains* parasitic blood worm. Human society is terrified of the next epidemic or pandemic or plague. Human society has *demonized* the sick such that we are consciously, and somewhat unconsciously as our opinions have been programmed into our psyches, repulsed by their presence. We treat the ill as though *they* are monsters, vampires that must be shunned and slayed. Human beings treat the ill so cruelly, yet they themselves are an illness on the world. We live in a virus-esque existence, although most remain blissfully ignorant or blatantly ignore this fact, and if we continue our rapid cancerous growth our host will undoubtedly perish. Human beings are little vampires, sluggishly draining the earth of its “blood.” So, I propose the question, which is more frightening: a disease—a rampant virus that strips people of their humanity, or the knowledge that we as members of humanity *are* a disease. *The Strain* instates this quandary in the minds of its readers if one is willing to look closely enough. It provokes us to dig deeply into society and consider which parts are truly monstrous and which parts we *treat* as monstrous. Disease is terrifying, forcing us to face our own mortality and the reality how we brush past death daily. But people should ponder for a moment that disease exists for a reason. The reason perchance being that disease is the last defense mother nature can muster against the blight of humanity.

Conclusion

Although this paper covers a variety of vampiric representations, there is always more to be done, more to analyze and explored in concerns to eras of society: its generational fears and the attitudes of said generations. Contemporary scholars have already begun to delve into newest phases of the vampire evolution in literature as well as other mediums of media and entertainment, and how these forms are encouraging a shift

in the view of the *other* toward hero rather than always a villain to be slain. Of course, the vampire will probably never be able to hang up its wicked cloak completely, as humanity will continue to look back on its past, and some of its present, identities to examine the truth of the darkness that haunts the world.

Work Cited

“Nuckelavee: Scotland’s Skinless Evil Monstrosity.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Storied, 13 Nov 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7Q_ABFyewM.

“The Russo-Turkish Wars.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Khey Pard, 16 Jul 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1RRQMO3qaY.

Auerbach, Nina. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Browning, John Edgar. “Horror and the Gothic’s Utility as a Cultural Resource and Critical Tool.” *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 4, no. 1, Dec. 2018.

Butler, Octavia E. *Fledgling*. New York, Grand Central Publishing, 2005.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. “Preface: In a Time of Monsters.” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Nov. 1996, pp. vii-xiii.

Conybeare, F. C. “The Testament of Solomon.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, Oct. 1898, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 1-45.

Del Toro, Guillermo and Chuck Hogan. *The Strain*. New York, HarperCollins, 2009.

Forcén, Carlos Espí and Fernando Espí Forcén. “Demonic Possessions and Mental Illness: Discussion of Selected Cases in Late Medieval Hagiographical Literature.” *Early Sci Med*, vol, 19, no. 3, National Library of Medicine, pp. 258-279.

- Goddu, Teresa A. "Vampire Gothic." *American Literary History*, vol. 11, no. 1, Oxford University Press, Spring 1999, pp. 125-141.
- Halberstam, Judith. "Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity." *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 1-27.
- Heidenreich, Linda. "Vampires Among Us." *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, vol. 24, no. 1, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, Jan. 2012, pp. 91-101.
- Kimberley, Steven. "A Psychological Analysis of the Vampire Myth." *Estro: Essex Student Research Online*, vol. 1, no. 1, University of Essex, pp. 38-45.
- Nelson, Victoria. *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*. Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Nizet, Marie. *Captain Vampire*. Translated by Brain Stableford, Black Coat Press, 2007.
- Onwuachi-Willig, Angela. "Race and Racial Identity Are Social Constructs." *The New York Times*, 6 Sep 2016,
<https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/16/how-fluid-is-racial-identity/race-and-racial-identity-are-social-constructs>. Accessed 27 Feb 2021.
- Robinson, Timothy M. "Octavia Butler's Vampiric Vision: *Fledgling* as a Transnational Neo-Slave Narrative." *Vampires and Zombies: Transcultural Migrations and Transnational Interpretations*, University Press of Mississippi, 2016, pp. 61-82.
- Serrano, Carmen A. "Dark Networks and Pathogens Undermining Democracies: Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's *The Strain*." *Languages, Literatures and*

Cultures Faculty Scholarship, University of Albany, State University of New York, 2019, pp. 98-112.

Stevens, Kristen. "Conformity Through Transgression: The Monstrous Other and Virtual Vampires." *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*, vol. 26, no. 2, Fall 2009, pp. 19-24.

Viereck, George Sylvester. *The House of the Vampire*. CreateSpace, 2018.