

VAMPIRES IN ENGLISH FICTION: POPULAR TRADITION AND HISTORICAL SOURCES

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The appearance of the vampire in English fiction can probably be traced to the pact between Lord Byron, the Shelleys and Dr Polidori made, allegedly, during a summer holiday in Switzerland, that each of them should write a story with a supernatural theme.

Undoubtedly, the most famous result of this summer pastime is Mary Shelley's monster. However, at this time, Byron wrote a fragment of a story dealing with a vampire, which was expanded subsequently by Polidori. Vampires had appeared in literature before. There were already several melodramas and a few French and German stories about them. ¹ However, the fictional vampire tales of nineteenth-century England, their sources and the function of vampire lore within the stories themselves is an interesting subset within this popular and vast subject, which illustrates both the development of the gothic horror genre during the nineteenth century and its relationship to works concerned with exotic folklore.

A native vampire tradition does not seem to have been strong in England. William of Malmesbury states that the dead walk when reanimated by the Devil, and William of Newburgh reports several cases of returned dead whose visits stop after the corpses are burned.² A third medieval writer, Walter Map, recounts several instances of walking dead who have to be exorcised.³ However, there is no blood sucking and nothing like the elaborate and widespread East European traditions.⁴ The English revenants seem rather a tame lot by comparison. The humanist Henry More included some tales of the returning dead from Silesia in 1653,⁵ but accounts of true vampires, and certainly the introduction of the names by which they were known, did not appear in Britain until the eighteenth century when books about travel to eastern Europe became popular.

The "Vampyr" was first published in 1819, but Polidori did not admit to have written it until later. It is probably the first deliberately fictional vampire story in England, although the author makes use of comparatively few vampire traditions. A young Greek girl, Ianthe, warns the hero, Aubrey, about vampires,⁶ but no details are given. She mentions only that it must suck the blood of beautiful young women to maintain its vitality. This, in itself, is atypical since in traditional accounts of vampirism, female victims are not generally preferred to any others. The two of them visit a wood where vampires hold their nocturnal orgies.⁷ Ianthe becomes a victim, while the hero grapples with the monster and notices his

superhuman strength.⁸ When Lord Ruthven, the vampire, appears to die, Aubrey promises not to reveal anything about him. The noblemen's body is exposed to the first cold rays of the moon.⁹ As a result, when the hero encounters him again in England, the vampire is alive once more and engaged to Aubrey's sister. There are a few hints that Ruthven has deliberately set out to destroy the hero to punish him for his knowledge, but this theme is not developed. The vampire emerges triumphant and the hero arrives to find, in a spectacular final scene, that his sister "had glutted the thirst of a Vampyre".¹⁰

This is an outline of the events and motivations in Polidori's story. The only traditional elements are the mention of bloodsucking, nocturnal gatherings and the vampire's superhuman strength. There is no precedent for the vampire being revived by the rays of the moon, but this may be an influence from Byron's vampire fragment. In fact, Polidori's tale spends more time describing the agonies of his noble and virtuous hero than it does in describing the actions of the vampire.

What then is the function of the vampire legends in Polidori's story? The introduction is not much help in answering this question, but it does reveal the extent of Polidori's knowledge of vampire lore, his view of the meaning of that lore and the sources from which he derived it. He refers to vampire stories in the works of travellers such as Pitton de Tourefort and Calmet,¹¹ and lists other synonyms for the most commonly used term vampyr. He gives a short history of the vampire superstition and advances the idea that it spread throughout Greece after the establishment of Christianity and that it concerned the belief that the dead rise from their graves and feed on the young and beautiful.¹² He mentions both Southey's "Thalaba" and Byron's "The Giaour", two poems incorporating romantic vampire superstitions. In the former, an innocent woman is doomed to become a vampire and in the latter a man is transformed into a vampire who must feed on his family even though he "loathes the banquet".

Despite these fairly extensive references, the text makes slight use of actual vampire lore. Interest in the Greek and Balkan areas at the time, was intense, owing partly to their attempts to free themselves from their Turkish overlords. Native culture, or what was perceived as such, was very popular, and the strange and exotic vampire superstitions seem originally to have been part of a general interest. Despite the comparatively detailed introduction and the lack of folk material in the story, it is nevertheless important for the outcome of the story that Ruthven is a vampire. Polidori's tale can be seen as an early example of the tendency to exploit the dramatic possibilities of folk tradition in a literary context. This view is reflected in the emphasis which Polidori places on the tragic doom

surrounding his anti-hero, an important attribute of literary vampires and once that will appear again. In folk-based vampire traditions, the creature is usually regarded as the manifestation of the devil and not the object for romantic pity. Polidori implies that if vampires are guilty, so is all humanity. As a result, the supernatural being is humanised and given qualities that are intended to arouse the audiences' horror or sympathy - one of the main aims of Gothic literature. Polidori also endows Ruthven with a diabolic fascination. He is characterized as having "dead grey eyes" and a "deadly hue of face, although the form and outline were beautiful."¹³ He is depicted as extremely attractive to women with a reputation for persuasiveness. Special mention is made of the power of his glance. It is easy enough to recognise the romantic figure of the Byronic hero recast in the mold of a vampire. The physical features are present as well as a concern with the evil aspects of egoism, a theme closely associated with this romantic literary figure. The name Ruthven was given to the character meant to be Byron in Caroline Lamb's expose novel *Glenarvon*, and, in view of the tension between Polidori and Byron, the story may also be an attack on the poet.¹⁴ Whether or not there is satirical intent, the influence of Romanticism is evident. Both Aubrey and the two women are described in the best romantic tradition of slightly melancholy virtue. The vampire's choice of young women victims creates a perfect damsel-in-distress situation. Aubrey meets the vampire in a wood while a storm is raging, echoing the gothic notion of sympathy between nature and human action.

Although Ruthven is a Byronic hero-villain, the fact that he is a vampire is never completely integrated into his character, and he remains a stock literary figure. As to the use of folklore in the work, it appears that Polidori selected or created a number of vampire motifs derived from printed sources. These motifs were used for local colour and general atmosphere, but they never become a major focus in the work. Nevertheless, Polidori's intention was quite serious – to show the power of evil in society. Very different is the novel published in 1847 entitled *Varney the Vampire or the Feast of Blood*. Thomas Preskett Press, who is also known for his story of Sweeney Todd, wrote this enormously popular work. *Varney* purported to be based on events that happened in England in 1730. Although there does not seem to be any English material from the early eighteenth century, the date corresponds to the widespread vampire scare in Eastern Europe which gave rise to scholarly treatises and popular pamphlets on the subject, many of which were translated and published in Britain in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ These books certainly gave impetus to the writing of vampire stories in English, and it is from them that much of the folklore is derived.

Sheridan LeFanu's "Carmilla" appeared as part of a collection of stories called *In a Glass Darkly*. The stories are held together by a series of prologues, supposedly written by a German scholar of the occult, Dr Hesselius. The prologues for each tale describe how the manuscripts came into the doctor's hands. The device of a German doctor doing occult research is something of a literary tradition in itself. LeFanu created the proper eerie verisimilitude by using this stock popular figure – distantly related to Faust, Dr. Copelius and Dr. Frankenstein – of the Teutonic physician well versed in cabalistic lore. Generically, "Carmilla" belongs to that evocative and ill-defined literary genre, the gothic romance; although some critics call the late nineteenth-century variety the terror romance, to distinguish it from the earlier pure gothic. Whatever its place in English literary history, "Carmilla" has the sharpness and discipline necessary to make a short story effective. The plot has all the supernatural events and mysterious, enigmatical characters associated with gothic literature. LeFanu, however, uses suggestion rather than bald description as a technique to create an atmosphere of terror. In the folk stories about vampires, especially memorates collected about actual experiences, belief in the existence of these creatures is sufficient to create the proper atmosphere of fear and awe. In the literary stories, belief is absent, for the most part, in the minds of both reader and author, and a different technique is needed. Gothic and Romantic writers who focused on the emotional values of experience had already developed the major impetus of this technique. It only remained for the author to adapt the techniques to the needs of his story. With this technical framework in mind, it is possible to consider the romantic use of folklore in "Carmilla".

The story has many characteristically romantic elements. The heroine is blonde and beautiful. The locale in which she lives is a "lonely and primitive place both picturesque and solitary".¹⁶ The schloss which she inhabits is surrounded by a moat and a drawbridge and contains a Gothic chapel. Karnstein, the vampire's home, lies "under the chimneys and gables of the ruined village, and the towers and battlements of the dismantled castle, round which gigantic trees are grouped overhung as from a slight eminence".¹⁷ Most of the action of the story takes place in the dim rooms of the schloss or in the surrounding picturesque woods and many passages of romantic description could be cited. Since there is none of the person-to-person interaction found in oral tale telling, descriptions of character, plot and locale are the writer's chief means of creating atmosphere. Long descriptions are unnecessary and rarely found in oral vampire tales, whereas they are the stock-in-trade of the novelist.

LeFanu also used foreign words and place names to create atmosphere. The story is set in Styria and the house is called by the German word, schloss. The carriage bearing the

vampire crashes into a lime tree with an ancient stone cross, both objects of superstition. The predominant imagery is black and red. The coach and horses are black, the mother and servants are dressed in black, and there is even a politically incorrect repellent black servant, while a pale-garbed servant attends the mother. Finally, the vampire attacks her victims in the shape of a black creature. In contrast to this, the blood which floods Carmilla's coffin and stains her nightgown is brilliant clear red.

These literary devices, the incidental use of superstition and local color create a creepy background to the tale and interact with LeFanu's use of vampire traditions. His technique is to maintain suspense by creating incidents which gradually reveal more and more characteristics of the vampire, but which the heroine does not understand until the situation is explained to her at the end of the story. This technique is typical of gothic romance. Walpole and Radcliffe made it one of the ground rules of the genre that the gothic machinery should be explained in some way. In "Carmilla", however, the supernatural element is real and the author sets up a series of ironic or ambiguous situations which hinge on superstitions associated with vampires and are elucidated only in retrospect.

While Carmilla is living with the heroine's family, she drinks but never eats, tires easily during the day and never leaves her room before one o'clock in the afternoon. When events give the other characters occasion to force her door during the night, her room is empty and her bed not slept in. In some areas vampires are believed to be active from noon until dawn.¹⁹ Carmilla reveals herself in other ways as well. A peddler notices her sharp teeth, religious hymns disturb her, she changes into a cat and a dark object "which swelled in a moment into a great palpitating mass",¹⁹ common shapes which a vampire can assume. She is seen from the windows of the schloss early in the morning walking through the trees in an easterly direction and looking like a person in a trance, and when the General finally decides to open her grave, he resorts to an "inquisition held according to law"²⁰ in the best tradition of vampire exorcism. The description of the body and its destruction also tallies with many of the motifs mentioned in published descriptions of vampire burials.

"The next day the formal proceedings took place in the Chapel of Karnstein. The grave of the Countess Mircalla was opened; and the General and my father recognised each his perfidious and beautiful guest, in the face now disclosed to view. The features, though a hundred and fifty years had passed since her funeral, were tinted with the warmth of life. Her eyes were open; no cadaverous smell exhaled from the coffin. The two medical men, one officially present the other on the part of the promoter of the inquiry, attested the marvellous fact that there was a faint but appreciable respiration, and a corresponding action of the heart. The limbs were perfectly flexible, the flesh elastic; and the leaden coffin flooded with blood, in which to a depth of seven inches, the body lay immersed. Here, therefore, in accordance

with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and head was next placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes, which were thrown upon the river and borne away, and that territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire..”-21-

As with all mystery stories, the clues become obvious once the mystery is revealed. The difference in this story, however, is that the clues depend on the function of certain superstitions and omens with relation to the main mystery, namely whether Carmilla is a vampire. This interaction is a major element in relating this literary tale to vampire traditions. The signs which reveal Carmilla’s true nature and the means by which she is destroyed have parallels in reports of actual cases of vampirism in Slavic and Greek areas. However, LeFanu makes two departures from common vampire tradition. The first of these is the name of the vampire. The vampire countess is called Mircalla, and her portrait looks exactly like Carmilla. The General recognizes in Carmilla, the vampire Millarca who killed his ward. Later this is explained as one of the “special conditions” to which the vampire is subjected. “Mircalla seemed to be limited to a name which ... should produce (her name) anagrammatically ...”²² This device helps to unify the story, but does not reflect traditions about vampires.

The second departure occurs in the character of the vampire herself. Female vampires are a less common phenomenon in traditional accounts of vampire activity. Carmilla is dark, beautiful, and melancholy, with a “strange fixed smile”. She resembles a female version of the romantic Byronic hero in her brooding attractiveness, and clearly has a hypnotic effect on the young girl who is the narrator. LeFanu exploits the sexual overtones inherent in the vampire tradition with its bloodsucking and nighttime activities. In addition however, he hints at a lesbian aspect to the relationship between the vampire and her victims. The concluding explanatory section of the tale, explicitly states that the “vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence resembling the passion of love, by particular persons... it will... husband and protract its murderous enjoyment ... and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship.”²³ This carefully delineated and drawn out relation between a female vampire and its female victims seems to be an adaptation of the vampire legend on the part of the author to create a special dramatic effect in the story and to add to the oppressive atmosphere and the growing sense of the victims’ danger. The heroine describes the vampire’s attentions as “foolish embraces... a strange and tumultuous excitement... mingled with a vague fear and disgust.” The same sensations she feels when

she begins to dream of the vampire's bite which she experiences as a "pleasant, peculiar, cold thrill" during which time Carmilla's strange paroxysms of languid adoration" become more frequent.²⁴

The character of Baron Vordenburg highlights the question of sources for the author's use of vampire traditions. Vordenburg, as one critic points out, is a *deus ex machina* in terms of plot resolution,²⁵ but he explains to the innocent, and therefore uncomprehending, characters that the strange and unexplained happenings are the work of a vampire. LeFanu had an interest in folk tradition and used it elsewhere in his Irish stories, but the sources for this tale seem to be published works on vampirism. In his concluding remarks, the Baron refers to several treatises on vampirism. *Magia Porthuma* written in 1706 mentions that vampires may appear during the day and that the remedy is to drive a stake through the heart, cut off the head and burn the body. He also stresses that all of this must be done according to law.²⁶ *Phlegon de Mirabilius* contains a story about a female vampire,²⁷ while Augustine's *De cura pro Mortuis* describes pagan funeral customs.²⁸ Harenburg's treatise printed in 1739 dealt specifically with vampires,²⁹ their appearances and ways to control them. Since all the books were available at the time and dealt with actual accounts of vampirism, although seen through the eyes of western Europeans, LeFanu would have had a reliable and extensive body of information to draw on.

The inclusion of the list in the story gives weight to Vordenburg's position as an authority on vampires, but LeFanu would have had other sources besides these at his disposal. "Carmilla" includes an incident about a Moravian count who undertook to rid the village of Karnstein of its vampire. The episode is elaborate and is later used to explain how Carmilla's tomb escaped detection for so long. In the story the vampire's shroud is stolen, it is lured into a tower and its skull shattered before its body is staked and burned. A similar incident is recorded by Calmet as an actual occurrence in the village of Liebave early in the 19th century.³⁰ The events tally exactly except that Calmet's vampire-killer is a Hungarian, while LeFanu's is a Moravian lover of Carmilla. Augustin Calmet's *Traité* was published in 1751, Polidori mentions it and LeFanu could well have known it too.

In 1897, Bram Stoker published *Dracula*, undoubtedly the most famous of the English vampire stories. Stoker's friend, Armeniur Vanbery was a widely travelled and educated professor of languages at Budapest and after they met in 1890, he seems to have given Stoker the idea for *Dracula* and provided him with much information which Stoker supplemented with reading from the British Museum.³¹ Stoker used the same techniques as LeFanu in many cases. For example, Jonathan notices the course fingers and hairy palms of the Count which

are telltale signs of the vampire, but of course, he is still innocent of such matters and does not understand what he sees. Stoker too has an East European occult expert, Dr Van Helsing, who can clear up such mysteries.

A number of superstitions related to black magic and vampires are also used, both for local colour and to create the proper atmosphere. Jonathan, for example, overhears the word, “pokol”, “stregoric” and “vukolah”, all of which refer to demonic beings. A village woman offers him a crucifix, garlic, mountain ash and wild roses when she learns that he is going to Castle Dracula. All of these are effective against vampires and other evils. Jonathan arrives at Castle Dracula on St. George’s Eve, May 4, a night when spirits were abroad. Later Van Helsing anoints the windows with garlic, a common means of warding off vampires. The Count himself is described as a “tall old man” with “peculiarly sharp white teeth” and “lips whose ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years”.³² Wolves are always associated with the vampire and their howling accompanies every climax in the novel. The vampire possesses a number of traditional characteristics which have become almost universally known thanks to the popularity of the horror genre. He has no reflection, leaves at cockcrow and changes into both a dog and a bat.

It is difficult to pinpoint Stoker’s exact sources. He was interested in the supernatural and discussed this with his friends. He jokingly ascribed the inspiration for Dracula to a dream, in the best tradition of Mary Shelley, Horace Walpole and R.L. Stevenson whose gothic masterpieces were supposed to be the result of sleep visions. In Stoker’s case, however, he himself claimed that dressed crab not romantic inspiration was the cause.³³ Actually Stoker had access to a reasonable number of books dealing with vampires, and, of course, there was his friend, a Slavic specialist. None of the ‘real’ vampires described in traditional folklore are as noble or as colourful as Count Dracula. The proptotype for Stoker’s vampire was a Walachian nobleman who ruled in 1455-1462 and earned the title “The Impaler”.³⁴ No physical descriptions of the original Dracula (who was not a vampire) were given, but this left Stoker free to depict him as a conglomerate of vampire characteristics with more than a touch of the Byronic hero. Dracula’s personal history is incorporated into the plot and supposedly, the author’s information about Translyvania was gleaned from “an old guide book” in the British Museum.³⁵

In his depiction of the vampires’ activities, characteristics, powers and destruction however, Stoker seems to have made an attempt to be as authentic as possible. He did, however, add a few contemporary touches. A blood transfusion is given to one of the Count’s victims as an antidote. The young doctor records his diary on a phonograph and the

prevalence of the demonic in Transylvania is attributed to the peculiar geologic configurations in the area.

Other English vampire tales undoubtedly influenced Stoker as well. LeFanu, Byron and Polidori had all created vampires who were both noble and rich. Stoker abandoned the rather melodramatic depiction of vampirism found in both Polidori and Byron, but he does not quite manage the detailed and finely drawn characterizations of LeFanu. The emphasis in *Dracula* is on action and dramatic effects and this formula proved very successful indeed.

Nearly all of the vampire lore used by these nineteenth-century British writers derived from printed rather than first hand sources. According to the criteria suggested by Richard Dorson for dealing with folklore in literature, namely, that of actual contact by the author with a particular folk tradition, there is little real vampire lore in these works, since the authors clearly used printed books as the sources for their stories. In addition, these English language, vampire stories have an aristocratic setting – a feature of this type of literature shares with other romantic and gothic fiction of the period. Although printed sources recorded real vampire stories, they were removed from their social context and the, mainly western, European travellers who recorded the traditions emphasized their curious, pagan or barbaric aspects. The travellers' attitudes added an exotic dimension to this fearful night creature and it is true to say that a great part of the attraction that the vampire had, and still has, for the English reading public was the very fact of its exoticism.

The writers of the English vampire stories took over both these aspects. In Polidori's story "vampirism" functions as a romantic ornament, but in LeFanu and Stoker it is an essential part of the narrative structure. Even if the authenticity of the sources is questionable, the combination of exotic folk tradition, supernatural menace and romantic imagination has created an aristocratic, black-capped, bloodsucker whose image is indelibly fixed in popular literature and imagination.

Footnotes

1

Dorothy Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (New York, C/P. Putman and Sons, 1917) pp. 159 ff.

2

Montague Summers, *The Vampire in Europe* (London Regan Paul) 1929).

3

Walter Map, *De Nugis Corialium* (trans. M.R. James (London, Cymrodorian society, 1023) pp. 110-114.

4

Felix J. Oinas, "East European Vampires and Draculas. *Journal of Popular Culture* (1982) pp. 108-114 give a concise summary of the characteristics of conventional vampires.

5

Henry Moore, "An Antidote against Atheism or an Appeal to the Natural Faculties of the Minde of Man, Whether there be not a God". (T Fletcher, Cambridge, 1655) Bk III, viii, ix.

6

Dr Polidori, "The Vampyr" *Three Gothic Novels* ed. E.F. Bleiler (New York, Dover Books 1966) pp. 41-42.

7

"The Vampyr", p.44.

8

Ibid., p.47

9

Ibid., p.56.

10

Ibid., p.72.

11

Dom Augustine Calmet, *Traité sur les Apparitions des Esprits et sur les Vampires ou Les Revenants...* (Paris, 1751) 2 vols; Pitton de Tourefort, *A Voyage into the Levant*, English translation (London, 1741) vol. 1, pp. 142-148, This section contains a description of the opening of a vampire's grave.

12

"The Vampyr" p. xx.

13

Ibid., p.28.

14

Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror* (New York, Constable and Co., 1921) p. 189.

15

Summers, p. 133.

16

Sheridan LeFanu, *In a Glass Darkly* intro. V.S. Pritchett (London, John Lehmann, 1947) pp. 222-288.

17

Ibid., p.296.

18

Dudley Wright, *Vampires and Vampirism* (London, W. Rider and Sons, 1927) p.12,

19

“Carmilla” p. 244, 252.

20

Ibid., p.273.

21

Ibid., p.285.

22

Ibid., p.287.

23

Ibid., p.287.

24

Ibid., pp. 240, 255.

25

Nelson Browne, *Sheridan LeFanu* (London, Arthur Barker, 1951).

26

Charles Ferdinand De Schetz (1706) quoted by Calmet, vol. II, pp 33-36.

27

Summers, pp.34 ff.

28

Calmet frequently refers to St Augustine, cf. vol I, ch vi.

29

Jean Christophe Herenberg, *Philosophicae et Christianae cogitatione de Vampiriis* (1733) quoted by Calmet vol I, pp. 47-50.

30

Calmet, vol I, ch vii-xv contains incidents that reflect LeFanu’s stories.

31

Henry Ludlam, *A Biography of Dracula, The Life Story of Bram Stoker*. (London, Fireside Press, 1962) p.80.

32

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (New York, Dover Books 1970) p. 30.

33

Ludlam, pp.99-100.

34

Raymond It, McNally and Radu Florescu, *In Search of Dracula*. This study supplies much background information to the historical figures who formed the basis for Stoker's vampire. (Greenwich Conn., New York Graphic Society, 1972).

35

Ludlam, p. 101.