

## **Vampire Literature: Perpetuating and Challenging Stereotypes**

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Vampire literature, like any form of literature, can both perpetuate and challenge stereotypes related to marginalized communities. How literature is interpreted can depend upon the specific text, the author's intentions, and the context in which the story is told. The perpetuation of stereotypes can also contribute to institutionalized discrimination and cultural traditions that further marginalize certain groups (Hilton and von Hippel). While the intent of vampire literature may not be to reinforce stereotypes, there are instances where certain works have contributed to such perpetuation. Therefore, it is important to decontextualize content in order to facilitate discourse that uncovers diverse interpretations.

The concept of the vampire originates with the ancient Germanic tribes. Their folklore included a belief in beings with supernatural characteristics symbolic of the modern-day vampire. One of the most recognized of these creatures is the *Nachzehr*, believed to be the antecedent to the vampire as described in subsequent literature (Close). Among the earliest texts related to vampirism in Europe was published by Michael Ranft in 1728. Successive texts drew upon Ranft's work to further embed vampirism into European folklore (Collins).

Asian regions, including China, Japan, the Philippines, and India have distinct vampire folklore. For example, in the Philippines, an *Aswang*, a vampire-like creature, has the power to transform into various shapes that includes a vampire-like being who preys upon pregnant women and young children (Park). The folklore surrounding the *Aswang* describes it as being able to "suck the blood" or consume the organs of its victims (Dale).

Regardless of the local traditions associated with vampire stories, there are several commonalities (Close). Vampires are almost always characterized as deceased individuals

returning to life. They often have supernatural abilities that are not bound by the laws of nature regarding aging and death. One of the most consistent traits is that they feed off the bodies of humans, usually consuming blood to sustain them. Other vampire traits that are common across literature include being nocturnal and immortal. Another common feature of vampire literature is that the vampire possesses vulnerabilities that can be used to weaken or destroy them. These vulnerabilities include sunlight, religious artifacts, garlic, and wooden stakes through the heart (Fischer).

While the themes associated with vampire storytelling have endured over time, the evolution of vampire literature has been transformed by global and period-specific contexts (Vučković and Pajović Dujović). Contemporary vampire literature has largely been shaped by the Gothic-Romantic era of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The most well-known publication of the time is John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which was published in 1819. Polidori's work has also been described as influencing one of the most significant contributions to vampire literature, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which was published in 1897.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, vampire literature evolved to explore additional genres, including Pulp Magazine's *Weird Tales* and Ann Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, vampire characters evolved into those portrayed in Nancy Collins' *Sunglasses After Dark*, which introduced a punk genre into vampire literature. As the 21<sup>st</sup> Century dawned, vampire literature embraced urban fantasy and paranormal genres with Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series and Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, vampire literature is often targeted at younger audiences with novels such as the *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer (Vučković and Pajović Dujović). These contemporary stories often also include themes of diversity and inclusivity that reflect the socio-cultural issues of the time.

While the vampire persona is often nuanced within a particular story, there are some overarching themes that are symbolic of social dynamics. For example, vampires are often portrayed as seductive or charismatic (Close). They charm their victims in order to gain their trust, as they victimize them. This characteristic is often viewed as a representation of forbidden desires and repressed sexuality, particularly within the Victorian era. The ability to seductively charm their victims can also be perceived as a reflection of power dynamics. Similarly, the vampiric insatiable thirst for blood can be seen as a metaphor for power, control, revenge, or other powerful emotional motivators. These characteristics situate the vampire as a dominant figure, exerting control over others and representing the fear of exploitation and manipulation by those in positions of authority (Fischer).

Vampire stories often explore themes of morality, redemption, life, death, and the struggle between good and evil. These themes are also often situated within the Gothic narrative, in which elements of horror and suspense are intertwined with the supernatural (Fischer). Gothic literature is also recognized for the sublime, which according to Shaw, “occurs at ‘the point’ where the distinctions between categories, such as cause and effect, word and thing, object, and idea, begin to break down” (46). In vampire literature, this is accomplished through the portrayal of the supernatural being that evokes emotion in the reader, ranging from wonderment to horror.

Other themes occurring within vampire literature include those associated with rebellion, nonconformity, and the introduction of the “other” (Buckley). It is common for vampires to be depicted as outsiders who challenge established norms and question authority. This portrayal situates them as foreigners or villains who infiltrate and disrupt the established order. Storylines around the othered status of vampires include their nocturnal nature, unique dietary needs, and a life of isolation and secrecy.

Many of the themes that transcend vampire literature serve as rich metaphors in a sociocultural context and underscore a wide range of human fears, desires, and anxieties. Interpretations of these themes are often viewed from the White, heteronormative dominant culture (Brayton). While the dominant representation of vampires in popular culture has predominantly featured White characters, there have been vampire narratives that include characters from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, much contemporary vampire literature includes explicit storylines related to diversity and inclusivity.

Literature, including vampire narratives, often embraces racial diversity that can extend sociocultural discourse in a seeming effort to raise awareness for issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and social inequity. However, it is also important to analyze how focusing on marginalized and underrepresented groups can perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce biases, and limit opportunities for diverse storytelling (Robinson). For example, Black vampire characters, including those portrayed in Octavia Butler's 2005 novel, *Fledgling*, are "othered" as exotic beings emphasized as different from the dominant cultural or racial group. From his perspective, they can be perceived as dangerous to their racial and ethnic counterparts, which, rather than challenging social norms, reinforces and perpetuates racial stereotypes.

Other vampire literature emphasizes racial stereotypes that reinforce harmful biases. For example, certain vampire narratives have depicted characters of color as exotic, mysterious, or inherently evil. Such portrayals can perpetuate racial stereotypes and contribute to the marginalization of people of color. For example, from a mainstream perspective, *The Black Vampyre: A Legend of St. Domingo* by Uriah Derick D'Arcy portrays Black characters who use their supernatural abilities to assert their agency, challenge social expectations related to race, and subsequently end race-related oppression (Rabin). However, according to Sutherland, from a critical perspective, the story can also be interpreted as villainizing the characters who are exotic,

mysterious, or inherently evil because of their race. In other vampire storylines, the association of vampires with darkness and fear can also elicit negative racial connotations, linking darkness and the character to which it is associated with evil or danger. In these cases, rather than emphasize diversity, such portrayals perpetuate racial stereotypes and contribute to the marginalization of people of color (Brayton).

Vampire literature has historically also marginalized women, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing gender inequalities. Traditional vampire literature focused on male vampire protagonists, with few female vampires given central roles. This imbalance limited the representation and agency of female characters in vampire stories (Välíkangas). In early vampire literature, women were mostly depicted as helpless victims and easily seduced. They lacked individual autonomy and were dominated by male characters. Women were portrayed as objects of desire, fulfilling the male vampire's need for blood and companionship without agency or autonomy. This historical marginalization of women in vampire literature serves as a backdrop to subsequent vampire literature that portrays women in other contexts that can also perpetuate marginalization and stereotypes.

The evolution of females in the vampiric narratives includes the depiction of them as femme fatales who use their beauty to allure men (Ridge). An example of this portrayal of the female vampire is *Carmilla* by J. Sheridan Le Fanu. Published in 1872, *Carmilla* is an epistolary novel in which the character of Carmilla personifies the femme fatale archetype. She is described as a beautiful, enigmatic, and seductive woman who uses her charm and allure to win the trust and affection of her victims, particularly young women. Carmilla's mysterious aura and her ability to seduce those around her create an air of danger and suspense. While the discourse related to this phenomenon can be portrayed as giving the female character power, within

feminist discourse, it reinforces the stereotype of women as manipulative, deceptive, and unwilling to accept normative social conventions.

In contrast to traditional vampire narratives, some modern vampire literature often features strong, complex, and empowered female characters. In these stories, it can be argued that authors have used the genre to explore feminist themes and challenge gender norms. An example of this type of narrative is *The Gilda Stories* by Jewell Gomez. Published in 1991, the novel tells the story of an African American woman who became a vampire in Louisiana in the 1850s. The novel chronicles Gilda's experiences as an African American woman through the centuries. A mainstream perspective on the story is that Gilda is a powerful, independent, and self-sufficient woman who resists traditional gender roles and uses her vampiric agency to assert control over her destiny.

Similarly, vampire literature, like any form of literature, has the potential to perpetuate LGBTQ+ stereotypes (Nee). These stereotypes are presented in a variety of ways. In some vampire literature, queer or LGBTQ characters are portrayed as villains or antagonists, as in *The Vampire Lestat* by Anne Rice. This association between queerness and evil can reinforce negative stereotypes and contribute to the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ individuals. Critics argue that these portrayals can perpetuate the harmful notion that LGBTQ+ identities are inherently immoral or dangerous, associating queerness with villainy or malevolence.

Vampire literature also explores themes of sensuality and eroticism linked to queer or LGBTQ characters, as in André Aciman's 2007 novel, *Call Me By Your Name*. While the exploration of sexuality and desire from the LGBTQ+ perspective can be positive, it becomes problematic when queer characters are reduced to their sexuality and portrayed solely for seduction and manipulation. This can reinforce the stereotype that LGBTQ identities are primarily about sexual desire and are sensationalized for heterosexuals (Nee). LGBTQ+

characters are further characterized as flamboyant gay men or hypersexualized and predatory queer women within the vampire genre. While this type of stereotype can be identified in all genres and topics of literature, it can reduce complex LGBTQ+ identities to caricatures and fail to represent the diversity and depth of queer experiences.

Vampire literature can also promote and romanticize social inequality within a broader context. Vampire narratives often depict an inherent power imbalance between vampires and humans. They frequently juxtapose the wealthy and aristocratic vampire lifestyle with an impoverished, working-class human population. This depiction can perpetuate class distinctions and reinforce the notion that wealth and privilege are deserved by those with power. By emphasizing the superiority of vampires, these narratives can reinforce the idea that some individuals or groups inherently deserve power and influence more than others. Through glamorizing the opulence of vampires based on power differentials, these narratives imply that social and economic inequality is natural and inevitable.

The narratives around race, gender, and sexual orientation become more complex with the intersectionality of these identities. Stories in which race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic disparities are intertwined delve into the intricate nuances of how the manifestation of each of the identities results in marginalization. When these identities intersect in vampire narratives, the stories can demonstrate a deeper understanding of power dynamics, discrimination, and the complexity of human experiences (Amador).

The intersectionality of marginalized identities within vampire literature can give voice to diverse experiences, challenge societal norms, and provide an opportunity for reflection on biases and the complexities of identity and oppression. However, they can also embody one-dimensional characters that represent simplified stereotypes of identities (Chan). Introducing characters with diverse identities solely for token representation can be problematic. Tokenism

reduces characters to their identities rather than exploring their complexities and individuality, reinforcing the idea that certain identities are only present for diversity's sake (Brayton).

Vampire literature often portrays vampires as outsiders or "others" to human society. This "othering" can mirror real-world processes of marginalization, where certain groups are treated as different, abnormal, or threatening (Buckley). By associating vampires with dangerous or deviant behavior, vampire narratives can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against marginalized groups in society. However, it is crucial to recognize that vampire literature is diverse, and not all works promote social inequality. While vampire narratives can perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices from one perspective, they can also challenge social inequalities from others. This duality challenges authors and readers to situate the portrayal of vampires in literature in a way that challenges stereotypes through diverse and inclusive storytelling.

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