

THE VAMPIRE: SUPERSTITION TO STORYTELLING

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The vampire, a creature of legend and fear, has transformed from a localized myth in the Balkans to a pervasive cultural icon with global reach. Its origins are traced back to the mythology and superstition of Eastern Europe, where, after the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718, Austrian authorities documented reports of people exhuming and re-killing their dead, spurred by a belief in vampires. These accounts would go on to spark widespread interest across Europe and beyond, blending science, superstition, and storytelling into one cultural entity. What began as a localized fear soon morphed into a literary phenomenon and scientific endeavor, eventually resulting in an iconic figure of Western cinema and beyond. From early Gothic stories in Germany to the famous works of Lord Byron and John Polidori to the modern, global cinematic utilization of the vampire as an iconic, totemic figure, the vampire has undergone a dramatic transformation over the course of its existence. This paper will explore, detail, and timeline how the vampire, once a figure confined to the folklore and superstitions of Eastern Europe, became an international, worldwide symbol of terror and intrigue, influencing literature, superstition, and pop culture on a global scale.

The Balkans as a region had been largely sequestered from Western Europe up until the Treaty of Passarowitz due to the Carpathian Mountains and a general lack of political overlap. Signed in 1718, the treaty ended the Austro-Turkish war and annexed parts of Serbia and Wallachia to Austria. With Austrian foot regiments entering these regions upon their acquisition to patrol and secure the area once the treaty was signed, immense cultural differences were noticed and recorded by the new Austrian overseers. Recorded accounts of Austrian authorities, particularly medics that were part of foot soldier regiments, such as Viennese physician Johann Friedrich Glaser and Regimental Field Surgeon Johannes Fluckinger, describe the seemingly supernatural occurrences of the undead coming back to life to wreak havoc on the living - or at

least the fears and practices of the villagers who believed this to be true. Glaser and Fluckinger originally composed their reports for an elusive investigative report entitled *Visum et Repertum*, but according to a translation from the text found in Klaus Hamberger's original dissertation on vampirism from 1689-1791, Glaser writes,

[I] searched and examined the same village from house to house, carefully and precisely, on December 12, 1731; but not a single contagious disease or cantagious condition was found... when I inquired further why they then swear that 13 people had died within 6 weeks, and what they complained about before their death... from which conditions they believe the all-too-quick burials, one after the other, cannot be possible, but rather because the aforementioned vampires, or bloodsuckers, were present. Whereupon I, as well as their own officers, tried to put it out of their minds as best we could... but it was not possible to change their opinion.<sup>1</sup>

In a different translation from Sturm and Volker's *Von denen Vampiren ofer Menschensaugern*, another account of a vampire can be seen, with the text by Field Surgeon Fluckinger reading,

In twenty or thirty days after his death some people complained that they were being bothered by this same Arnod Paole; and in fact four people were killed by him. In order to end this evil, they dug up this Arnod Paole forty days after his death— this on the advice of their Hadnack, who had been present at such events before; and they found that he was quite complete and undecayed, and that fresh blood had flowed from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears; that the shirt, the covering, and the coffin were completely bloody; that the old nails on his hands

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Hamberger, *Mortuus non mordet: Kommentierte Dokumente zum Vampirismus 1689-1791* (Turia und Kant, 1992.)

and feet, along with the skin, had fallen off, and that new ones had grown; and since they saw from this that he was a true vampire, they drove a stake through his heart, according to their custom, whereby he gave an audible groan and bled copiously.<sup>2</sup>

This devout belief by the villagers of the Balkans piqued extreme interest by the Austrian authorities, as is evidenced by the reports in it of themselves. Should these instances have been merely usual proceedings, these documents would not be so detailed, and would likely not have been necessary at all. Indeed, this documentation would swiftly lead to a growing interest in the vampire as a figure in general, evidenced by the amount of literature and scientific inquiry that would soon follow it.

In 1728, German theologian Michael Raft penned "Über das Kauen und Schmatzen der Todten in Gräbern," or, in short, a treatise on vampirism in Europe, citing this newfound interest in the vampire to the new sightings and incidents in the Balkans. This was not a shock for the time, as Germany was going through an immense scientific enlightenment period, and curiosity or answer seeking of this nature was common, particularly in relation to supernatural or paranormal occurrences.<sup>3</sup> In another academic instance, Christolob Mylius, the editor for the popular scientific journal *Der Naturforscher*, wrote a journal on vampires in 1748 and commissioned his close friend poet Heinrich August Ossenfelder to write a poem for the subject, entitled *Der Vampir*.<sup>4</sup> This poem is the first known use of a vampire character in a poetic setting, and one of the very first to be used in fiction as a whole according to a wide variety of scholars

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (Yale University Press, 1988), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Heidi Crawford, "The Cultural-Historical Origins of the Literary Vampire in Germany," In *Journal of Dracula Studies* (Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 1, 2005), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Tille, *Der Vampir als Element der Literaturgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012)

in the field.<sup>5</sup> Following this creative leap into the foray of combining science, superstition, and fiction, many other writers followed suit. The amount of Gothic German literature during and following the enlightenment is easily understated - even if not outright described, the influence is potent and clear in many works of Gothic fiction. Though concentrated within the nation's bounds, vampire fiction was not limited to Germany in this time. In 1764, even the famous French writer Voltaire entered the vampiric literary scene with a satirical piece comparing predatory businessmen and stock market traders to vampires.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, the vampire stories made their way to Britain, with the nation's Romantic literary era taking hold. Lord Byron, likely after reading notes from poet laureate Robert Southey of Tournefort's *A Voyage Into the Levant* which contained mentions of Eastern European culture, with special focus on paranormal and supernatural entities such as the vampire, was inspired by these revenant figures and began to tell stories of his own regarding the creatures.<sup>7</sup> Thus began an obsession by British writers and readers alike of the monster, the totemic icon, the vampire.

The ghost-story writing contest between Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, John Polidori and Lord Byron on the shore of Lake Geneva during a summer holiday in 1816 is an incredibly famous tale passed around by literature scholars even still today, and is most famous for having produced *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, Mary Shelley's most influential work that is often described as being the first science fiction book. However, this contest also produced the two first British vampire stories. Byron and Polidori, long time literary rivals, spent their summer at Lake Geneva attempting to outdo each other in their stories, and would eventually produce *Fragment of a Novel* and *The Vampyre*, respectively, taking after Tournefort's ghoulish tales of

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<sup>5</sup> Crawford, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Crawford, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Sam George and William Hughes, *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the Present Day* (Manchester University Press, 2013), 45.

Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> Influenced by Polidori's work as evidenced by the use of similar themes and iconography, James Malcolm Rymer would write *Varney the Vampyre* in 1820, one of the most successful penny dreadfuls of all time.<sup>9</sup> Again, just as the German Enlightenment era saw an impossible to understate amount of vampire fiction in that time, so too did 1800s England. These stories paved the way for a far higher anxiety level and extremely prevalent levels of superstition once disease and death raged through the country through this century, especially during the killings of Jack the Ripper. An account of one of the Ripper's killings even directly mentions the vampire as a figure, stating,

...it is so impossible to account... for these revolting acts of blood that the mind turns as it were instinctively to some theory of occult force, and the myths of the dark ages rise before the imagination. Ghouls, vampires, bloodsuckers, and all the ghastly array of fables which have been accumulated throughout the course of centuries take form, and seize hold of the excited fancy.<sup>10</sup>

These anxieties, then, were clearly not just the fears associated with fiction. A real fear of the vampire began to extend beyond the page in Western Europe, permeating all that was bad, evil, or taboo about society, an easy blame for what was unexplainably horrific.

This true and superstitious anxiety even made its way across the pond as a number of accounts of vampirism were documented in New England in the 19th century. Colloquially referred to as the "New England Vampire Panic," it's thought that, with the invisible threats of tuberculosis and other diseases ravaging communities in the Northeast United States, people turned to last resort, superstitious means to end the suffering. Because of how epidemics spread,

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<sup>8</sup> George and Hughes, 29.

<sup>9</sup> J. Melton, *The Vampire Almanac: The Complete History* (Visible Ink Press, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Beresford, *From Demons to Dracula: The Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth* (Reaktion Books, Limited, 2008,) 143.

being that one member of a community contracts a disease, spreads it to the others, and then dies, it is easy to point the blame at that first individual, and to attempt to end the terror by further ending their life, a.e. exhuming and re-killing them. According to a Smithsonian article, “Incredulous city newspaper reporters dished about the “Horrible Superstition” on front pages. A traveling minister describes an exhumation in his daily log on September 3, 1810. (The “mouldy Specticle,” he writes, was a “Solemn Site.”) Even Henry David Thoreau mentions an exhumation in his journal on September 29, 1859.”<sup>11</sup> Another account from *American Anthropologist* in 1896 describes an event in New England wherein an exhumation on the suspicion of a vampire was performed.

In the same village resides Mr.[ ], an intelligent man, by trade a mason, who is a living witness of the superstition and of the efficacy of the treatment of the dead which is prescribed. He informed me that he had lost two brothers by consumption. Upon the attack of the second brother his father was advised ... to take up the first body and burn its heart, but the brother attacked objected to the sacrilege and in consequence subsequently died. When he was attacked by the disease in his turn, [ ]'s advice prevailed, and the body of the brother last dead was accordingly exhumed, and "living" blood being found in the heart and in circulation, it was cremated, and the sufferer began immediately to mend and stood before me a hale, hearty, and vigorous man of fifty years. When questioned as to his understanding of the miraculous influence, he could suggest nothing and did not recognize the superstition even by name. He remembered that the doctors

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<sup>11</sup> Abigail Tucker. “The Great New England Vampire Panic,” (*Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2012.)

did not believe in its efficacy, but he and many others did. His father saw the brother's body and the arterial blood.

The influence of the vampire in explaining away the unexplainable is clear, and yet, parallel to these developments, he as a figure remained steadfast in literature - and, soon, film.

*Dracula* by Bram Stoker scarcely needs an introduction. Published in 1897, the work swiftly and steadily became the most influential piece of vampire literature to ever exist. As Matthew Beresford states, “Love it or loathe it, [*Dracula*] is certainly one of the most famous stories ever written, be it a classic text or otherwise, and is perhaps the only occasion where all the different aspects of the vampire, from history, folklore and literature, combine.”<sup>12</sup> The novel is not only a foundational text in the entire legacy of the vampire in media, but so too is it a culturally pervasive figure around the world, even today. The vampire in general as we know it is directly inspired by Count Dracula as a character and a myth, and countless interpretations of the character - like Count Chocula, The Count from *Sesame Street*, and Bela Lugosi’s 1931 depiction of the fearsome creature in *Dracula*. This film took a hold of culture of America - immersed in the Great Depression, horror films of all kinds boomed. As William Manchester states in a 1975 article for the *New York Times*, “[T]he worst years of the Depression were great years for horror movies. What was sick in these films seemed to appeal to what was sick in the country. . .”<sup>13</sup> *Dracula* was no exception, with its thrilling and terrifying supernatural story. It was unlike any other story of its time, as most horror stories had a more rational explanation - *Dracula*, on the other hand, “expected its audience to accept a five-hundred-year-old vampire as a reality.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Beresford, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Scivally, *Dracula FAQ: All That’s Left to Know about the Count from Transylvania*. (Hal Leonard Corporation, 2015), 116.

<sup>14</sup> Scivally, 111.

Despite Tinseltown's hesitations, the film took off and was even more appreciated for its departure from everything else of its genre.

As previously discussed, the vampire had been present in Europe and the United States for some time by the famous 1931 film depiction of Dracula, with various enterprising and influential works being both penned and filmed during the turnover of the vampire from folklore to fiction, but no work of vampire fiction was more *globally* renowned and influential than Lugosi's *Dracula*. This film spurred global interest in the vampire in a way never seen before. No longer was the vampire limited to Europe and America - he was an enterprising, totemic figure of terror and taboo across the globe. With the far more commercially successful and potential-filled industry of cinema becoming far more viable and global, *Dracula* saw near immediate and triumphant success. As Matthew Beresford states, "...it was not until the mass-market technology of cinema, which allowed for the widespread success of the *Dracula* films starring Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee from the 1930s onwards, that any really widely accepted vampire form became apparent... Had it not been for Stoker's novel the vampire we all recognize today may never have existed."<sup>15</sup> In the wake of *Dracula*, a booming genre was expanded and, in many ways, truly created on a global scale within cinema: the monster movie.

Following Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* comes works like *Drakula Istanbul'da*, or, *Dracula in Istanbul* from Turkey in 1953, 吸血蛾 or *Vampire Moth* from Japan in 1956, *El Vampiro* from Mexico in 1957, *Mr. Vampire* from Hong Kong in 1985, *Outback Vampires* from Australia in 1987, *Night Watch* from Russia in 2004, *Perfect Creature* from New Zealand in 2006, *Let the Right One In* from Sweden in 2008, *The Twilight Saga* from the United States beginning in 2008, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* from Iran in 2014, *Curse* from India in 2018, *El Conde* from Chile in 2023, and many, many, many others. The vampire as a figure has undergone a drastic

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<sup>15</sup> Beresford, 139.

transformation from a localized folkloric creature from Eastern European superstition to a global icon of horror, taboo, and darkness. The Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718 and the subsequent Austrian reports on alleged vampires and sightings of these creatures acted as a spark to ignite the flame of the vampire's spread. Spurring on both cultural and scientific explorations into the vampire, the vampire moved from a purely folkloric entity to a powerful character of literary fame, becoming a central figure in the Gothic and Romantic literary movements. This movement reached its peak with the publication of *Dracula* in 1897, and went truly global after the release of the 1931 Universal Pictures film of the same title. In summary, the vampire, originating in a small sector of Eastern Europe, has spread its legacy across the globe, slowly but surely becoming a worldwide phenomenon, rivaling the largest literary icons and film stars with its influence and legacy.

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