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Significance of the Bite in Vampire Fictions

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Abstract: Vampires are defined by their bite, whether it is a sensual nip or a violent blood withdrawal. Many variations of the bite are present in literature, including novels, poems, short stories, and folklore. This paper investigates the importance of the bite from the classical vampire fictions to contemporary vampire fictions. The vampire's bite has undergone many transformations, yet it has always remained present. The bite of a vampire symbolizes his power. The moment the teeth of the vampire meet the skin of the victim is a climactic moment in literature. Female and male vampires in literature attack their victims differently, representative of the context in which the author is writing. Traditional vampire fiction highlights women as objects of desire. Male vampires channel their desire into destruction through physical wounds to the neck. The manifestation of the strong female vampire is present in literature during certain periods, such as the Victorian period.

Keywords: Vampire Bite, Vampire fiction, Folklore, Male vampire, Female Vampire.

The study of the origin of bites from folklore to contemporary literature would reveal that the bite is more than just a method of attack; it is the means by which the author explores sexual roles, gender relations, and human identity. Some of the earliest examples of vampires in writing are folkloric and it is important to distinguish them from their fictional counterparts. Although Paul Barber claims that "the vampire of folklore is a sexual creature, and his sexuality is obsessive" (Barber 9), his appearance might suggest otherwise. Folkloric vampires look more like disheveled peasants than dark, mysterious nobles (Barber 2). However, their sexuality can be debated as folkloric vampirism is not well-documented and reports might be partially fabricated. In the story of Peter Plogojowitz, it is noted that he was found with "wild signs," which is interpreted as an erection. Folklore does not include descriptions of vampire attacks because the stories focus on the description of vampires in their state of discovery. It often mentions that the victim's death was sudden and unexpected, or in some cases the vampires may strangle or suck the victim's blood in the middle of the night (Barber 7). Vampire folklore focuses on explaining epidemics and forming the connective thread between the deaths of various individuals in the same community. Therefore, its bite would be of less importance. Folklore is concerned with creating a scapegoat by identifying vampires, not the vampire's method of attack.

Although the bites of male folkloric vampires are unimportant, female folkloric vampires exist as rebellious, bloodsucking creatures. They differ radically from the modern literary vampire as they lack traditional vampiric qualities. Instead, they serve as a model of the ultimate rebel for their time: "women who are aggressive, destructive, rebellious, and, at the same time, irresistibly sensual--in short, everything traditional women were not supposed to be" (Heldreth 200). Modern readers can see underlying tones of female empowerment in folklore. Perhaps these gruesome tales about women were appealing because it was unfathomable that women would disobey societal norms to such an extent.

Male vampires again become important as the modern vampire motif is introduced. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact entry of the motif into literature, Heinrich August Ossenfelder (1748) is credited

with its introduction into modern European literature with his poem, "Der Vampir" (Frost 36). The vampire in this poem is presented as an aggressive male seducer who forces a sexual interaction with a young maiden in the middle of the night. Ossenfelder presents this rape episode as acceptable as he ends the poem with a sarcastic question from the vampire: "Compared to such instruction/ What are a mother's charms?" The female victim does not respond, as the female opinion was not deemed important and the question was rhetorical. According to the church, sex is only acceptable within the confines of marriage. Ossenfelder defies church law and uses the vampire bite and bloodsucking as a metaphor for premarital sexual relations between a man and a virgin. The male vampire holds the sexually dominant role, while the woman's role is one of inferiority, implying male dominance in society.

The vampire's bite continues to have sexual undertones in John W. Polidori's *The Vampyre*, the first example of a vampire story in the Romantic period. In his story, Ruthven, the vampire, attacks Ianthe, the victim, but the attack itself is not witnessed. Polidori makes a stylistic choice to omit the actual violent scene, and readers infer details from the description of her body: "There was no colour upon her cheek, not even upon her lip; yet there was a stillness about her face that seemed almost as attaching as the life that once dwelt there: – upon her neck and breast was blood, and upon her throat were the marks of teeth having opened the vein: – to this the men pointed, crying, simultaneously struck with horror, 'A Vampyre! a Vampyre!'" ("Polidori," n.p.). Since Ianthe was found with blood on her breast, it implies that the attack had a sexual component. The story's representation of gender focuses on women as powerless objects of sexual desire. The combination of destruction and sexuality forms the frightening, yet intriguing vampire. Polidori gives the word "vampyre" a negative, evil connotation as Aubrey is the protagonist in the story and Vampire Ruthven is the antagonist. Furthermore, the public disproves of Ruthven's actions, which may hint at Polidori's early disapproval for the subordination of women. Another perspective is the parasitic one: Ruthven takes advantage of women and feeds off their resources without offering anything in return (Heldreth 13). This would

mean that Polidori views women as holding importance in society as they can sustain men.

Some of these themes are found in other types of literature from similar time periods. Although Nikolai Gogol is not typically mentioned in a discussion of vampiric literature, Gogol began his literary career during the height of Romanticism and included literary vampires in his short stories. He uses the vampire bite in the metaphoric sense: "The traditional image of bloodsucking acts as a metaphor for tapping into human essence; the vampiric drawing of this essence produces sustenance and, generally, diabolic revelry for the vampire and results in the loss of some or, more frequently, all of the victim's life energy. The vampiric act may represent an extremely sensual and quite possible sexual experience for both vampire and victim" (Swensen 492). Gogol's vampires are male and he uses the bite as a method of transfer; the transfer is clearly sexual and often involves a transfer of life energy.

The vampire-woman again becomes important, as it emerges as an archetype in European literature during the Decadent movement of the late 1850s (Frost 44). Literature during this movement focuses on death, corruption, and sexuality. "The supernatural splendor of her appearance, however, is a deception, masking the wickedness of her true nature; for just as the elegant marble tomb discreetly hides the hideousness of corruption, so does the vampire-woman's lovely flesh conceal the putrescence of her soul. Beneath the thin veneer of charm she is ferocious, scornful, and sadistic, intent only on gratifying her lust and luring young men to their destruction" (Frost 44). Her features are described as "fairly standard," with her mouth being "athirst and amorous–like a venomous flower waiting to suck in its prey" (Frost 44). These vampire women are dominant, cruel and predatory. Their mouths are large and open because they are focal points; these women use their sexuality to lure in men and their bite is their weapon of choice. Frost specifically writes that these vampire women lure "young men to their destruction," but there are important examples of vampire women who prey on other women, like Carmilla.

J. Sheridan Le Fanu's "*Carmilla*," written in 1872, marks the beginning of the Victorian period in vampire literature, with Carmilla

being the prototype for a legion of female vampires (Heldreth 19). The lesbian eroticism of the novel is surprisingly explicit for its time. *Carmilla* was possibly written by Le Fanu to explore a taboo sexual subject that could not be discussed in other terms (Heldreth 19). Le Fanu likely wanted to defy gender boundaries by assigning a different gender role to the female. Society assigns women the role of powerless victims, and men as powerful forces. Le Fanu alters societal dynamics by giving a woman the power of the bite. Carmilla is in control of her destiny. Her bite is similar to the male vampire's bite in strength: "The punctures which she described as having occurred near the throat, were, he insisted, the insertion of those two long, thin, and sharp teeth which, it is well known, are peculiar to vampires; and there could be no doubt, he added, as to the well-defined presence of the small livid mark which all concurred in describing as that induced by the demon's lips" (Le Fanu 1872). Her bite is not the delicate nibble of a sweet girl; her chomp is as powerful as a man's. Carmilla is also the first literary vampire to fulfill and execute her homosexual desires and attacks. Ruthven and Aubrey's relationship in *The Vampyre* hints at homoeroticism, but it is never realized. It is also overshadowed by Ruthven's heterosexual attacks on female characters. Auerbach explains that Carmilla expresses the public's hidden interest in homoerotic friendships (Gordon & Hollinger 11). Other interpretations exist; for example, Margaret Carter sees Carmilla as a mother figure (Gordon & Hollinger 5). Le Fanu does explore the intimacy between a female vampire and female victim, but the relationship is not representative of one of mother and daughter. Carmilla holds a role of power, but does not act as a parent. She is intimate with her victim, but not in a motherly way. Her bite is similar to the male vampire's bite in earlier literature: both sexual and destructive.

The bite of Count Dracula, the lead vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), is destructive, but lacks the intimacy and sensuality of Carmilla's bite. The novel is particularly relevant to gender discussions because both female and male vampires are present. Dracula's mouth is described as follows: "The mouth, so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and cruel looking, with peculiarly sharp, white teeth; these protruded over the lips" (Stoker 26). His teeth sound more like rat teeth than the sexy fangs in more modern vampire

literature and film. Their purpose is destruction, not seduction. Many commentators today believe the bite episodes are sexual; others believe them to represent a duality between good and evil (Frost 55). Still, others think Dracula's attacks are an "obvious symbol for rape" (Heldreth 31). Stoker might have given his vampires such unappealing teeth to highlight the lack of consent in the attacks. Readers begin to fear the teeth whose sharpness represents the brutality and frequency of the attacks. In chapter fifteen, Van Helsing tries to convince Steward that Lucy is responsible for the deaths of children in the neighborhood. Van Helsing explains to Dr. Steward: "'See,' he went on, 'see, they are even sharper than before. With this and this'--and he touched one of the canine teeth and that below it" (Stoker 203). As Lucy the vampire becomes more powerful, her teeth become sharper, and her bite becomes more potent.

Interestingly, Stoker's mother was an advocate for the small feminist movement in Ireland which may have spawned his interest in gender roles and relationships (Heldreth 31). In one scene, the character Jonathan Harker awakens to find three women surrounding him and he recounts the event: "Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer--nearer. I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the super-sensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there" (Stoker 46). Stoker gives his female vampires powers similar in strength to the male vampires in the novel, but they only exist under Dracula's control. The women in the novel are aggressive victimizers, similar to the female folkloric vampires, but they have not yet achieved their full independence. Dracula prevents the female vampire in this scene from attacking Harker, even though she is nearly mid-bite when he enters. The female vampires are then reminded that they are subordinate to Count Dracula. He warns them in this scene that he gets to have the first encounter with each victim, and then afterwards victims may be passed to the vampire women. Stoker gives Dracula the lead vampire role, supporting the gender stereotype of males as independent, aggressive leaders. Still, the step towards gender equality is obvious.

Alternative views exist as to Stoker's characterization of Dracula and the female vampires. "Dracula exemplifies not only ego's abnegation of the transformative Spirit, but also the masculine divorced from the feminine. He is the quintessence of the male active aspect of Intellect and Will, completely devoid of the feminine receptive principle. Without that balance ... the vampire is truly inhuman in its heartlessness and inability to empathize" (Herbert 65). According to this view, it is possible that Stoker included the female vampires because Dracula has no feminine qualities. Stoker needed a source of feminism to balance out the strong male presence; so he included female characters. Alternatively, Stoker may have used Dracula as a metaphor for the abuse of woman both as property and tools in men's efforts to control and abuse other men (Johnson 76). In support of this view, Dracula tells a group of English gentry: "Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall be mine--my creatures do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed" (Stoker 324). However, if Stoker intended to characterize women in this way, the women in the novel would only be victims, not vampires themselves. "Like Stoker before her, Rice has changed the code" (Heldreth 60). Anne Rice transformed the vampire motif in the late 20th century with her works that modernized the nature of vampires. Her victims are rarely the traditional vampire virgins. Both vampire and victim, often both members of the same sex, are sexually charged attractive beings (Heldreth 61). She explores relationships and love between her characters, focusing on humanizing vampires. As a result, the physical bite is of less importance in Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire.* Instead, she uses the appearance of teeth to subtly announce a character's vampiric tendencies. For example, "It was Lestat ... grimacing in such a way that his great teeth showed prominently" (Rice 53). Her vampires desire more than just blood. They desire human connections, relationships, and companionship, evident in Rice's lack of emphasis on the bite (Heldreth 64). She may have only used the vampire motif as a way to present homosexuality without public disapproval. Her novel may have also been a statement against the strict gender roles in society by showing male and female roles as interchangeable.

In *The Gilda Stories* (1991), the bite is again redefined as a tender, compassionate exchange rather than a predatory act (Johnson 72). "A small incision at the side of the neck. Blood seeping out slowly. It reminded her of the wounds she and her sisters suffered on their tiny hands as they'd wrenched the cotton from its stiff branches...Gilda put her lips to the trick of blood and turned it into a tide washing through her, making her heart pump faster" (Johnson 72). Other bites examined in earlier literature were blunt metaphors for rape. This bite is part of a sexual, loving relationship between two partners. Gomez explains that she wrote this book to defy gender stereotypes in literature: "I think it's pathetic that mainstream fantasy and science-fiction writers, who like to see themselves as our literary and social visionaries, remain so limited when reflecting race and gender in fantasy writing" (Gordon 89). Gomez also says that she "felt that in exploring the sensual nature of vampires [she] could recast it in a less exploitative mode," (Gordon 91) referring to the exploitation of women in traditional vampire literature.

Recently, other authors have tried to associate vampires and women in a positive light. *Night Bites* (Brownworth 1996) is the first collection of short stories written only by women; these women "expand the boundaries of the genre" while offering a feminine perspective (Brownworth XIV). These stories are modern short stories with vampiric characters and themes. The bite is not an important part of these stories because violence is omitted. In the first story, for example, the vampires say that next time "she will be with us" (Brownworth 17), referring to turning one female character into a vampire. The story ends shortly after this line, implying the attack, but carefully omitting it. These female writers explore a variety of gender dynamics. In some stories, a male vampire attacks a female victim; others involve lesbian vampires. The women are showing that gender roles vary. Sometimes, a woman can be the victim, but in other situations she can creatively escape and maneuver herself out of a dangerous situation.

The bite is used as a metaphor for premarital sex in the most recent vampiric pop culture phenomenon, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (Reagin 1). As previously noted, the bite was first used as a metaphor for premarital sex in Ossenfelder's "Der Vampir". Since Meyer is identified as a Mormon, she may have used the bite as part of a

forbidden fruit complex. There is temptation for Edward to bite Bella, but he must resist all temptations in order to prevent himself from harming her. Therefore, there are few bite scenes in the novel. When Meyer does include a bite scene, such as when James bites Bella towards the end of the novel, the scenes lack the sexual drama of most bites previously examined. Meyer characterizes Bella as a damsel-in-distress, prompting Edward to be her strong savior. Edward is portrayed as a strong, sexy vampire, very different from the gruesome vampires in earlier literature. Meyer is returning to classic gender stereotypes: the woman as helpless and inferior to the man who is powerful and independent. "In fiction, vampires never die at all but come trooping back each year in wardrobes of new or at least refurbished outfits" (Kendrick 1992). The vampire's bite has evolved from the first vampire in folklore to Twilight, but it has never disappeared. Authors depict the vampire bite scene in their own style and use the bite to make a statement about the relationship between characters. In some cases, the bite is a sexual encounter between two females, and in others it is a deliberate attack. Either way, the author explores gender roles as he or she constructs the dynamics of victimizer and victim. Whether the bite is destructive, seductive, or something in between, it is the central aspect of vampirism that will never fade from literature.

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