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Syphilis and the Vampire Literature

by

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Abstract

The power of plagues influences many aspects of human life, including social, political and artistic spheres. Epidemic diseases shape culture and inspire artistic trends. Syphilis influenced human history profoundly since its first documentation in the late 1400s. As it became widely known as a venereal disease, syphilis had been a poignant theme in art and literature since the early 16th century.

The vampire literature appeared at the beginning of the 1800s with Polidori's, *The vampyre* in 1819. As a subgenre, it differed from other Gothic literature due to the greater level of realism present in the stories. This quality helped to make the newly-created villains more believable and therefore, more horrifying. The realism owed partially to the personal histories of the founders of the subgenre. Many of them had personal experiences with syphilis during their lifetimes, either as a sufferer or by being in close contact with a sufferer. Positioned to observe the effects of the disease on the sufferers, the people around them, as well as its social implications, the authors incorporated syphilis as a salient undercurrent in the early vampire novels.

Syphilis and its implications pervade the early vampire literature. The authors used supernatural language as a disguise to describe the conditions that they had witnessed. Vampirism became a metaphor for the disease. Hence, the subgenre known as vampire literature can be described as the authors' "syphilologues" for the 19th century.

Introduction

Epidemics are an influential force upon and throughout history; they have the ability to colour the mood of a civilisation. However, their full power is only rarely emphasised¹. For example, syphilis had been a plague of men since the 15th Century, but its full effect had not been fully accounted for. The role played by syphilis was indolent and vague, but still profound as its powers could be felt throughout every stratum of human life.

Syphilis has affected many brilliant minds throughout the 19th century. For some, it was considered as a way of obtaining "a brilliant quickening of mental associations" while others considered it something that "[...] everyone caught at one time or another²." The emergence of Vampire Literature coincides with the prevalence of syphilis in the artistic circles in the 19th century. Many of the writers and poets involved in the inception of this subgenre were sufferers of this disease or had had close contact with a syphilitic. Their works differed from the pre-existing Gothic literature by their sense of realism which bordered autobiographical. These works reflected the illness experiences of the artists and made the Vampire Literature a kind of "syphilologue."

Introduction to Syphilis

Syphilis is known as strictly a disease of man. The first mention of it in European history started abruptly in 1493 following the return of Columbus's fleet after the discovery of the Americas³. To this date, the American origin of syphilis is still under debate^{4,5}.

What is known after years of intense research is that the disease is caused by *Treponema Pallidum*, a spirochete bacterium. The untreated disease consists of three stages⁶.

1. The primary stage occurs after the direct exposure to an infectious lesion. A firm, painless skin ulceration called a chancre appears at the sight of contact which will self-resolve in 4-6 weeks.
2. The secondary stage is characterised by a pinkish-red skin rash that affects the trunk and the extremities. Other manifestations, either specific (e.g., *condolyma lata*) or non-specific (e.g., fever and fatigue), also occur during this stage. Untreated patients enter the latent phase, and few cases proceed to the tertiary stage.
3. The tertiary stage is characterised by tissue destruction by gumma formations. Gummas can affect almost any part of the body, including vessels, bones, viscera and nervous tissue, leading to deformity, paralysis, insanity, dementia and eventually death.

The Beginning of Vampire Literature

The literary vampire emerged in the early 1800s, despite the fact that the word "vampire" ("*vampyre*") had entered the English language in 1732⁷. Before the establishment of Vampire literature as a distinct subgenre, Gothic literature was considered to be works of high fantasy⁸. The unanimous decisions made by the pioneers of this genre to infuse realism into their stories helped the new subgenre to break away from its roots.

To reinvent the image of a medieval villain into something contemporary, these early pioneers drew references from their daily lives. During the Victorian times, many things would frighten a middle-class reader. One of these things was a deadly, prevalent but taboo venereal disease avoided in polite society. This was a disease that plagued the artists themselves, as the impact of it affected both princes and paupers alike. Real-life suffering became the fuel for literary horror. From the very beginning, the shadow of the dread disease syphilis could be felt emanating from the bloody pages.

1. Dr. John W. Polidori, *The Vampyre*, 1819

The literary vampire first appeared in a full-length novel by an English doctor, John Polidori (1795-1821), who was the companion and the person physician to Lord Byron (1788-1824). Byron was a real-life aristocrat who had contributed to the genre largely by his personality and his actions. He had suffered from various venereal diseases, and one of them was syphilis in 1808⁹. By the time Polidori met and travelled with Byron in 1816, the noble was considered "disagreeable" to those around him⁹.

A closer look at the novel showed that the story was almost autobiographical. Dr. Polidori was the young novice, Aubrey, following the seasoned aristocratic Byron/Ruthven on a trans-Continental travel. In this sense, Byron became the model for the first literary vampire. It was also the first time that the vampire was a titled, refined monster. The literary incarnation of Byron was also a rake and a seducer who was a dangerous person to know. However, Ruthven was described as an active hunter and a corruptor. Those who received his alms “inevitably found that there was a curse upon it, for they were all either led to the scaffold, or sunk to the lowest and the most abject misery¹⁰.” The only women that he dealt with must be in perfect virtue, so that he could ruin them to the lowest of states. In fact, Ruthven himself actively sought out his targets as if he was on a singular mission. He sought out the places where his victims would be so he could carry on his task.

These descriptions may be seen as a thinly-masked narrative of the fate of the victims who had contracted syphilis during the early 1800's. These people lose their health silently, often squandering their wealth trying to procure a cure. Respectable doctors turned away a patient when he was diagnosed with syphilis, and the victim had to resort to quacks with phony cures. When they were found out as diseased, they lost their social standings and were shunned and abhorred. The women were considered fallen and driven away from home. Many resorted to crime and prostitution to keep themselves clothed and fed with the inevitable consequences of the gallows or poverty.

Polidori, as the observer, had described the corruptive force as an aristocrat, and clearly delineated the inexperienced, the idle, and the women as the most vulnerable populations to this corruption. *Lord Ruthven* became the first literary vampire and a metaphor for a disease that had strong societal implications.

2. Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857

The French critic and poet Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (1821-1867) was a major influence on the development of the *femme fatale* motif in the artistic world in the 19th Century⁷. It was a motif that was incorporated readily by Vampire Literature and became one of its most recognisable archetypes. Baudelaire had incorporated the vampire into two poems, first collected in his influential anthology, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, before they were charged with gross indecency and forced to be removed from consequent editions.

Baudelaire had willingly contracted syphilis from the Parisian prostitutes in his youth, believing that the mortification of his flesh would liberate his mind to allow him to greater literary heights. It was a decision that he would come to regret later, as the spirochetes interfered with his nervous system, leading to embarrassing incontinence, before it started to affect his mind. Syphilis had also contributed greatly to his relatively early demise¹¹.

In *Les Fleur du Mal*, both “*Le Vampire*” and “*Les Metamorphoses du Vampire*” deal with the new vampire archetype. Both were written in the first-person. The first one described a man who was suffering from an affliction which drove him to the verge of suicide. However, the victim was denied death, because he was told that he had contributed to his own misery. He was described as being dead while still living, and therefore, a “vampire”. In the second poem, a man had a sexual encounter with a

female vampire, who turned from a beautiful woman into a “leather-bottle with gluey sides, full of pus (translation mine)”¹¹ afterwards. The disillusion before and after the encounter was exacerbated by the vivid words that the poet chose to describe the two forms of the same figure. The exact reaction of the man in the second case was not laid out, but left to the now horrified imagination of the individual readers.

When both poems were put together with Baudelaire’s own history, the poems seem almost autobiographical in their description of someone suffering from a disease that he had given himself. It was a painful disease that was both hated and feared, to the point that suicide was contemplated by the sufferer. The carrier of it was a female vampire, a figure that uses seduction to transmit the contagion. Her victims, in turn, became “vampires” themselves.

3. *Guy de Maupassant, Le Horla, 1887*

One of the most fascinating manifestations of syphilitic infections is the insanity in the terminal stages. This madness held both the observer and the victim in both fear and awe. It was one of Baudelaire’s students who masterfully delved into this wild madness in his short story, Baudelaire, in 1887.

Like Baudelaire, Henry René Albert de Maupassant (1850-1893) had contracted syphilis while he was still a young man. He died from it when he was 43 years old in 1893, two years after he had been declared insane. A few short years before his own descent into a syphilitic derangement, however, he had published a short story in which the protagonist was also slowly driven mad by an invisible force that sapped away his vitality and his reason.

The novella was composed of a series of diary entries from an unnamed narrator. The narrator ascribed his plague to a New World origin – much like syphilis itself – which came into Paris on a yacht. Invisible, it came to him in the night and drank his life away. As the story developed, the narrator started to doubt everything that he saw since no one would believe in his tales of an invisible monster. The readers follow the slow and tortuous mental and physical descent of the narrator as everyone that he knew turned him away and every thing he saw he questioned himself. He traced his own movements to see if he could find the origin of his nightmare, and blamed himself when he thought he had invited this entity to enter his abode. As he shuts himself into his own home, he becomes convinced that this creature, called the “Horla,” had come into Paris with a mission to infect the whole Continent. The narrator believed that he was only the first of a string of victims of an on-coming epidemic. At the end of the novella, the narrator set fire to his own apartment in the hope that he would trap the monster inside and destroy it. When he realized that this ploy had failed as well, he ended his diaries with the resolve to commit suicide¹².

Out of the archives of Vampire Literature, *Le Horla* stood at an unshakable position, being one of the most imaginative and one of the most horrifying of all. What was perhaps more horrifying in hindsight was the fact that the novella had accurately prophesied the fate of its author. A few short years later, de Maupassant had followed the stead of his unnamed hero in the descent into a florid madness. His story gave the readers a chilling first-hand account into the mind of a man losing touch with reality, and in the case of Maupassant himself, it was because of syphilis.

4. Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, 1897

The novel *Dracula* was sometimes called the *magnum opus* of vampire fiction. It was something that had incorporated and expanded on all of the elements that had been laid down in the pioneering works of its genre. It is interesting to note that Bram Stoker (1847-1912) himself might have died from syphilis as well. His death certificate indicated that his cause of death as “locomotor ataxia,” which was a manifestation of tertiary syphilis. There were speculations that he had contracted it from prostitutes after his marriage⁷.

Stoker identified strongly with two of his protagonists in the novel⁸, which gave the story an autobiographical element. Writing in this manner allowed the author a chance to personify and externalise the disease entity and create another persona to deal with his own sickness experience.

The disease entity became Dracula, who was the king vampire who invaded England. He was portrayed as a contagion which travelled through blood and intimate acts. He was a foreigner and an aristocrat who preyed on women during a time when neither one were popular¹³. Both stereotypes were also considered by the middle-class to be carriers of syphilis during the late 19th Century. Wherever he went, families and moral codes were broken in his wake. The women were his victims and his accomplices. Dracula considered the women as belonging to him, and he infected them so that they could, in turn, infect the men in their lives¹⁴. Dracula’s mission of invading England was described in terms of an epidemic with the infection rippling across the population at an exponential rate. And *Dracula*, the vampire himself had become a symbol for the contagion.

The humanistic force became *Van Helsing*, who was described as the pinnacle of middle-class men. Stoker’s identification went to the extent of sharing the same first name with this character⁸. Van Helsing was called onto the scene to treat Lucy Westenra’s vampire sickness. Ultimately, he tried to eliminate the disease through hostility towards the carriers of the disease, which were depicted as the female vampires. The female body, a place where infections took place, became a target for the doctor’s crusade against a menace that was threatening the middle-class values⁷. His consequent campaign on Dracula was not carried out by himself, but by his male followers¹⁴. In writing himself as Van Helsing, Stoker might be venting his own hatred for the carriers that had given him the disease in a cathartic setting. The professor, therefore, became an instructor and an example to the middle-class men on how to deal with their fear and hatred of wanton women as carriers of sexually transmitted diseases. His archaic methods of dispatching the vampires became a literary fantasy of a sadistic response to an oncoming threat to family and morals.

Dr. Polidori created the first literary vampire. His creation was an aristocrat who corrupted his way through the peasants and women, whom he ruined. Polidori was followed by Baudelaire, who created an equally seductive and dangerous female counterpart to the male vampire. Maupassant allowed the readers a vision into the minds and thoughts of a vampire victim, who was slowly losing everything that he owned, including his life and his sanity. And finally, it was Stoker who consolidated all these elements and gave the disease a name and a face. He also gave the middle-class men a target and a way to deal with this vampire threat. This threat, this “Secret enemy” of the middle-class people throughout the 19th Century was syphilis. It was a link

between the pioneers of vampire fiction. Through the (auto-) biographical works of these authors in the newly-created subgenre, the figure of the vampire became a metaphor for this silent plague.

Art is a reflection of life. It is something that allows the artist to transcend the mundane of everyday existence into something extraordinary. However, art is still entrenched in the realities of life, and epidemics – large scale infections that touch every strata of human life – inevitably lends itself into a motif in art. The realism in artwork helps it to endure the test of time. Today, the effects of these early works of fiction are profound as new incarnations of the “vampire” appear frequently and often prominently in all forms of media. However, despite all the myriad forms that the vampire could take on, the original entity was a product of the collective imagination of a few authors who were, in turn, linked together by their experiences with a common “secret enemy.” And this enemy was a disease that raged during their own lifetime – syphilis.

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