Monstrous Mashups: The Provenance and Progeny of the Victorian Vampire Novel

Hamilton Armstrong

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

—— Ecclesiastes 1:9, *The King James Bible*

Night is a world lit by itself.

—— Italian poet Antonio Porchia

The trope of the vampire is so ancient, so persistent, and so ubiquitous that it needs no introduction. The folkloric beings who subsist by feeding on the life essence (generally in the form of blood) of living creatures have been recorded in many cultures. Literary historian Brian Frost has declared that the "belief in vampires and bloodsucking demons is as old as man himself," and may go back to "prehistoric times." (Frost, p. 3) From the Greek *vrykolakas* in Greece and *strigoi* in Romania to the Russian *upir,* the world recognizes the concept, if not the word. Many of the vampire stories that we enjoy today introduce a modern twist on the ancient archetype. Even the earliest stories expanded on the oral tales to give the telling an identifiable recognition. Although through much of history, collaboration was the established mode of artistic endeavor, the relatively current tradition of individual artists and intellectual property, art (writings, motifs, artworks, performances, and all manner of cultural performance) has shown that art could be appropriated and given one's own stamp. The latest incarnation of such artistic borrowing is a new literary genre called "the literary

mashup": public domain writings interspersed with original contemporary work. The term has been taken from early urban hip-hop and house music, which would "sample" or "mash" established music riffs in with new music or as motifs in a new frame. But, this is just a new name for an old practice. This paper will survey selected modern vampire novels and make the case for the mashup being the latest version of a very old appropriative literary tradition, whether working in fine arts or literature, fictionalizing a realistic portrait of daily life or fantastical events and creatures of the supernatural night. As indicated in the introductory quotes, there may be "nothing new under the sun," but the night is a "world lit" unto itself.

Although the first recorded use of the Old Russian *upyr* is thought to be from a document written by a priest dated 1047 AD (Melton, xxxi), the term *vampire* was not popularized until the early 18th century, after vampire superstition was brought into Western Europe by immigrants from Eastern Europe. The English term was derived (possibly via French *vampyre*) from the German *Vampir,* in turn derived in the early 18th century from the Serbian *vampir.* The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces an early, if not the first, use of the derivative word *vampire* in English to 1734, in a travel pamphlet by the name of *Travels of Three English Gentlemen.* Soon after, in 1748, came the first artistic reference and the first to use the word metaphorically and as an insertion to a popular genre. In the short poem *The Vampire,* German poet Heinrich August Ossenfelder presents an aggressive young seducer, one who would rob a young woman of her innocence and her womanly Christian virtue, as being a "vampire":

And as softly thou art sleeping
To thee shall I come creeping
And thy life's blood drain away.
And so shalt thou be trembling

For thus shall I be kissing
And death's threshold thou' it be crossing
With fear, in vampire arms.
And last shall I thee question:
Compared to such instruction
What are a mother's charms?

(Ossenfelder, *The Vampire,* 1748)

Christian themes in poetry were very popular in 18th century Europe but this poem is unique in conflating unsanctioned sex and ravishment with spiritual and literal death. The orgasm manifests "le petit mort" as practiced by the deathly swain. Clearly, such didactic works served at many levels. The Christian church could approve the controlling chill of strong admonition against ruinous vice and the rakes could experience the frisson of the supernatural forbidden in the vampire figure as dream lover. British poet Robert Southey was next to give further poetic mention to the vampire with his extended poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1797). Thalaba, a Muslim warrior, is visited by a vampire posing as his dead wife. He recognizes it and slays it, setting his wife's spirit free. In literary long form, it was the success of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* in 1819 that truly gave impetus to later vampire novels of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. The work is described by vampire researcher Christopher Frayling as "the first story successfully to fuse the disparate elements of vampirism into a coherent literary genre." (*Vampyres,* p. 108) Here again we find the appropriated element (the evil vampire) reframed brilliantly (as elegant seducer). Dr. Polidori had been inspired by a fragmentary story called *Fragment of a Novel* (1816) by Lord Byron, Polidori's patient, during the infamous rain-and-laudanum drenched weekend in Switzerland that also produced Mary Shelley's seminal classic *Frankenstein.* It was the success of Polidori's work that led to another

early vampire story, the popular serialization in newsprint pamphlets, *Varney the Vampir,* a popular Victorian "penny dreadful" by James Malcolm Rymer (or possibly Thomas Preskett Prest), (1845 to 1847). Published as a book in 1847, *Varney* borrowed the sophisticated vampire idea from Polidori's Lord Ruthven, although Varney could travel during the day. British writer Sheridan Le Fanu reframed the vampire story with a lesbian twist in his "Carmilla" from *In a Glass Darkly* (1872). Carmilla is beautiful and seductive and is, like Varney, a sympathetic character. Turning again to the vampire as incarnate evil, Scottish Christian symbolist writer George McDonald created the work for which he was most celebrated, *Lilith,* in 1895. In that work, the sleeping figures of the "Carmilla" story are greatly expanded to host the psychic vampires Mr. Raven and the ur-seductress Lilith, in keeping with Christian lore that Lilith was the original witch, Adam's mistress, and a succubus who consumed the life energy of men at night. In 1907, German-American writer and Nazi apologist George Sylvester Viereck wrote a very American vampire novel, using the psychic vampire concept from MacDonald and transforming Le Fanu's lesbian vampire into a thinly-veiled male gay love triangle. In *The House of the Vampire,* Viereck makes energy vampire Reginald Clarke into a pitiless and undefeatable plagiarist, a villain who robs men of their creative work and ability to create more. For Americans at the beginning of the "Great American Century," the killer of the dream and the second chance at fame and fortune would be a monster indeed.

However, the gold standard for gothic vampire fiction is Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula.* Stoker drew upon the zeitgeist of his age— an era of rapid progress and commensurate anxiety— to perfectly encapsulate the elegant modern sensibilities, contained sexuality, and experimental spiritualism that coexisted in Victorian society. He also drew deeply upon Eastern European folklore, particularly Romania and Carpathian mountain superstitions, to

create a reframing of geographic notes, the journal-writing genre, and scientific writings that lent an air of realism to his carefully-weathered masterpiece. Looking back, we can see that *Dracula* was the work of an artist with an eye to the commercial appeal of his work. Stoker worked primarily as a theater manager. As such, he understood not only how to create drama but what appeals to audiences. *Dracula,* like *Frankenstein* before it, became popular through stage adaptations, which led many back to the original source work. Vampirism, presented as metaphor of contagious disease, and suggestive of sex, blood and death, was embraced by Victorian Europe where diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis were greatly feared and not uncommon. Using this strain of social anxiety, and drawing on the previous works such as *The Vampyre* and "Carmilla," Stoker was inspired by *The Land Beyond the Forest* (1888) by Emily Gerard, as well as her article "Transylvanian Superstitions." from *Nineteenth Century* magazine, which he read while traveling across Europe. When a colleague mentioned to Stoker the story of Vlad Tepes, the historical despot infamous for genocide in Eastern Europe, Bram Stoker had the key to modeling a fictional character that could drive his exotic story and still retain historic authenticity. He wrote more on the theme of immortality and the supernatural——*The Lair of the White Worm* (1911), and *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* (1914), among others——but Dracula, a near roman à clef despite the fanciful elements, was clearly Stoker's magnum opus.

Many have imitated and appropriated Dracula, its text, characters, plotlines, and themes in the Twentieth century. The first, during Stoker's lifetime, may have been Friedrich Wilhelm "F. W." Murnau's seminal silent film, *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922). Murnau frankly hoped to be able to film *Dracula* directly, giving the novel its debut in the new medium of film. Stoker, however, would not approve the rights, and so Murnau, undaunted, moved forward by changing the names of some characters ("Dracula" became "Orlok,"

the characters of "Lucy" and "Mina" were confusingly reversed, etc.) and setting the same plot in Weimar, Germany. But, the German Expressionist style, the appropriate casting, the unique make-up and lighting effects, and the staccato choreography lent the early film a genuinely creepy atmosphere, which have been lauded and copied since. Modern intellectual property laws make such thinly-veiled substitutions less possible today but, despite the brazen usurpation of the Stoker property, *Nosferatu* was nevertheless imbued with artistry and originality that has made it an important part of the vampire cultural image.

Late 20th and early 21st century writers have continued the trend of borrowing-with-a- twist. Science fiction and horror writer Richard Matheson continued the theme of vampire as emblem of contagion with *I Am Legend* in 1954. This has subsequently been remade into three films: *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (in 2007, starring actor Will Smith, remade with zombies instead of vampires). In 1976, popular New Orleans writer Anne Rice revived the gay vampire theme with her first (of many) supernatural historical romance novel, *Interview with the Vampire.* Charlaine Harris furthered the vampire boom in a sympathetic mode with *The Southern Vampire Mysteries (The Sookie Stackhouse Novels): Dead Until Dark* (which led to the popular HBO television series *True Blood*). A similar twist was provided by Stephanie Meyer in her phenomenally successful teen vampire hit book *Twilight* (2005) and its book/film sequels.

The most recent reframing of vampire fiction began with a new genre: the "mashup." In 2009, writer Seth Grahame-Smith, in collaboration with his editor at editor at Quirk Books, Jason Rekulak, decided to take advantage of the preponderance of public domain texts that have been relative non-sellers on the market by giving them a fresh update. Such texts include the works of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, the Bronte Sisters, Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, Leo

Tolstoy and many others. Since these books belong to no particular estate or publishing company, they may be dissected, changed, treated, or reframed in any way as long as the original authors are given due credit. The result was an innovation in the publishing world, the cult favorite *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith. It rose to #3 on the New York Times Best Seller list in the first week after release and, since that time, has sold over a million copies and has been translated into over twenty languages.

The concept involves strategically intersplicing a public domain text with a supernatural plot element, retaining the original text with some minimal rewriting for cohesion. Purists decry the concept and the resulting form but the effect has been to bring many new readers to the altered classics, many who go on to read the original because they enjoyed the mash-up. From the well-executed original mash-up with zombies has come a rash of novels introducing vampires to the classic stories, with varying degrees of success. Writer Regina Jeffers revisited *Pride and Prejudice* with her *Vampire Darcy's Desire: A Pride and Prejudice Adaptation (2009).* Mr. Darcy as vampire makes sense in terms of the difficult relations between Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett but Ms. Jeffers doesn't have the same skill as Grahame-Smith in executing the alien element as seamlessly. In the wake of his previous success, Seth Grahame-Smith had another solidly written—and far more rewritten—hit with his vampire mash-up novel, the 2010 *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter.* In this novel Grahame-Smith is not adapting a specific text but rather channels the facts and styles of classic Lincoln biographers like Doris Kearns Goodwin and David McCullough. The text is supposedly based on "secret diaries" kept by the vampire hunter Lincoln and presented to the author by a vampire named Henry Sturges. *The Los Angeles Times* was positive about Grahame-Smith and *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter,* saying "a writer who can transform the greatest figure from 19th century American history into the star of an original vampire tale with humor,

heart and bite is a rare find indeed." (Mcintyre, *LA Times*) Other vampire mash-up attempts have been amusing but, again, not entirely successful. 2010 has also seen *Little Vampire Women,* writer Lynn Messina's Louisa May Alcott interlacing and *Jane Slayre,* a Jane Eyre re-visitation by author Sherri Browning Erwin, appear in the burgeoning mash-up field. Both novels suffer from a lack of cohesion between the supernatural elements and original plot. There are many other classics being "mashed" with a variety of supernatural twists, including sea monsters (*Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*), werewolves (*Emma and the Werewolves*), mummies (*Mansfield Park and Mummies*) and androids (*Android Karenina*). As ridiculous as some of these sound—and may be—it cannot be denied that the mash-up has generated popular interest in and heated discussion regarding these classics where little existed before outside of the narrow confines of the academy.

Current creative writers are appropriating more than raw text and plot devices. In 2009, Bram Stoker's great-grandnephew Dacre Stoker unsuccessfully traded on the family name with *Dracula the Un-Dead,* co-written with Ian Holt. The novel revisits the Dracula characters twenty-five years later, finding them all diminished. Unsurprisingly, readers disliked the breathless style and rejection of the nobility inherent in the original. One Amazon reviewer wrote, "Most people write sequels to books that they love, but Dacre Stoker wrote *Dracula the Un-Dead* as a sequel to a book that he seems to hate. It's a long, boring literary rape of a beloved classic, and a pretty dull book besides." (Solinas, *Amazon Reviews*) Although this reworking of family themes didn't work out so well, other writers are appropriating history to create evocative subgenres. A successful foray in the new vampire novel has been the "steampunk" subgenre of fantasy fiction. In steampunk, the characters are set in mythical future that frames contemporary high-technology (nuclear energy, solar power, and other yet-unenvisioned energy sources) or "magic" with industrial

revolution/steam power aesthetics. Classic models for this are H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Material's* trilogy. Two well-written and lauded recent examples are *Soulless* (2009) by Gail Carriger and *Avalon Revisited* (2010) by O. M. Grey. Both have main characters as vampires set in a Victorian-like period where unwieldy riveted machines are powered by mysterious technologies. Finally, Rice University humanities professor and author Justin Cronin has brought readers full circle from the vampire-as-metaphor-of-contagion theme in his 2010 best-seller *The Passage.* Cronin has noted the ongoing vampire novel fascination and spoken of the popular sub-genre humorously in interviews as "the vampire industrial complex." (Simon, "A Novel Reminder")

For almost two hundred years, the vampire novel has enjoyed the attention of the international reading public, speaking of our fears and cultural anxieties. Eric Nuzum, author of *The Dead Travel Fast: Stalking Vampires from Nosferatu to Count Chocula,* noted in a 2010 NPR interview that "it's (the vampire) almost this perfect vessel. If you want to understand any moment in time, or any cultural moment, just look at their vampires." (Adler, NPR) Like its namesake, the vampire moment in the literary arts seems ubiquitous and eternal, albeit with each generation experiencing a newly framed incarnation. But, can the archetypal vampire tale ever really be new?

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