

A Shift from Monsters to Heroes: Observing the Change in the Depiction of Vampires from “The Vampyre” to *Twilight*

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Abstract—Vampires are those fictional creatures that have not only stood the test of time, but also emerged extremely resilient. One of the first texts written under the genre of ‘Vampire-Romance’ was “The Vampyre” by John Polidori in the 19th century. From this text of the 19th century to Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* in the 21st century, there has been a significant change in the representation of vampires. From being represented as a monster, which although physically attractive, was meant to be feared; to a romantic hero, the change is distinct. The emotions of the readers in relation to vampires has also changed from that of fear, to an obsession, bordering on frenzy. A close reading of the two texts has shown that vampires are no longer mindless monsters, but rational beings capable of feeling emotions just like humans. It is also observed that the female characters in both texts are extremely submissive and under-represented, although they do play key roles in the development of the plot of the two texts. It is also seen that the protagonist of “The Vampyre” is extremely representative of the society at the time it was written in. This study can be used to trace the development of vampires, and understand how their representation has changed in literary texts.

Keywords: Vampires, Polidori, Meyer, Feminism, *Twilight*, *The Vampyre*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human fascination with the unknown and the mysterious led to the creation of the wildly popular ‘Vampires’. For a creature that is entirely fictional, it is fascinating that the image of vampires has been constructed and polished right down to the finest and most intricate details – to the level that almost all cultures have very similar ideas about this creature. The debate of their existence is ongoing even today, with various reports of sightings and massacres. The most interesting aspect however, is not the concept of vampires, but actually, the changing patterns of representation of these fictional characters across centuries.

A number of questions arise with respect to the texts written under the genre of ‘Vampire-Romance’. Some of the most pertinent questions are: if the socio-cultural conditions of

the society have influenced the plots and the characters of the texts, how the female characters or the love interests have been represented in these texts and finally if the idea of strong, dangerous and possibly violent vampires being attractive to the women in the texts have a link to the expectations of women in real life, as to what they seek in their ideal man.

One of the first texts ever written under the genre of ‘Vampire-Romance’ was “The Vampyre” by John Polidori in the 19th century. From this text of the 19th century to Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* in the 21st century, the obsession with vampires has clearly remained the same, if not more. However, there are substantial changes in their representation over these 186 years – both texts depict vampires in very different ways. Why is there such a stark difference in their representation and what does it imply?

Vampires are extremely popular fictional characters, who have managed to retain the obsession that was created centuries ago. The change in their representation however, could be attributed to the change in times. In such a situation this study becomes relevant, because characters, especially fictional and mythological ones, are deeply representative of the culture they were born from. A change in their representation would obviously imply that a subsequent change has also taken place within the culture. It is visible that there is a glaring contrast between the arrogant and sadistic vampire named Lord Ruthwen in Polidori’s “The Vampyre” and the emotional, vulnerable and romantic vampire named Edward Cullen in Meyer’s *Twilight*.

This study aims at analysing how and why the representation of vampires has changed from “The Vampyre” in the 19th century to *Twilight* in the 21st century.

2. BACKGROUND

To fully comprehend the context in which various texts written on these beings, it is necessary to understand the

folklore and origin stories of these creatures. Two separate studies carried out by Orloski and Godfree explore similar folklores of vampires. Vampires first emerged from Eastern European folkloric tradition. Although there were some variations across cultures and time, essentially they remained the same. Thieves, drunkards, people who died a violent death and people who had no faith in God were the ones most likely to turn into vampires after their death. Vampires were used as threatening stories to frighten young women into obeying their elders and not go around with strangers, because vampires tended to appear in the guise of handsome men [Orloski 2]. The physical appearance of vampires also varied depending on the culture. According to some, vampires looked just like humans, and according to others, vampires looked like decaying corpses. The depiction of vampires was also dependent on the class of the society. For the longest time, vampires were depicted as only belonging to the lower class, as only the lower section of the society was capable of thieving and partaking in petty pleasures. The only way to deal with vampires, according to tradition was to stake the body to the grave, decapitate the corpse and then cremate the body [Godfree 1-2]. English folklore also believed that people who committed suicide were more likely to turn into vampires. Ironically, and unfortunately, the people who willingly chose to end their lives were forced into immortality. Another myth slightly different from the ones above is that vampires attacked only on a full moon night, similar to werewolves. This author also elaborates on the preferred point of attack on the body - the neck. This bite was also called the “Love-bite” or the “kiss of the vampire” [Twitchell 9-11]. Interestingly enough, the definition of a vampire in the Oxford English dictionary in 1734 depicted a vampire as a red-faced, furry beast like creature that is fattened because of all the blood it has drunk [Switzer 108]. So when did the idea of vampires change from that of a dreaded monster who preys on the innocent to a sexually attractive, romantic character?

Most critics agree that Polidori’s work was a pivotal and extraordinarily influential text which combined both gothic and romantic sensibilities through which he transformed the entire idea that Eastern Europeans had built about vampires. He changed their representation from that of an animated, rotting corpse into a travelling, handsome, aristocrat seducer who was perfectly at home amongst humans [Bishop 1-5]. John Polidori basically laid the foundation for the ‘Vampire-Romance’ genre in literature. Godfree makes a very interesting point about the possible reasons behind the immense popularity of *Twilight* among the female audience of the present century. Apparently the *Twilight* series offers old-fashioned romance in the arms of an alpha male. Vampire-romance, therefore caters to the very unique need of female readers who crave an old-fashioned romance that is set in contemporary, modern society [1-2]. Orloski says that while vampires have always represented what society fears the most, their relationship with the society has changed since Polidori [29].

The following study will analyse these two texts for underlying gender disparities, and power play of any particular gender. It will also explore if the characters represent the society of the time it was written in. The numerous studies undertaken on Vampires in general and on “The Vampyre” and *Twilight* specifically, definitely, successfully address the origin stories of vampires, but fail to throw light upon myths and representation in cultures that aren’t European. Also, the most popular beliefs associated with vampires like, their aversion to sunlight, garlic and their residence in a coffin are not explored at all. Most articles focus on how differently both vampires have been described in the texts – as in their physical appearances, their personality and temperament, etc. What isn’t very clear is the background of the expectations and socio-cultural conditions of the society these texts were written in. Also, most studies focus only on the vampires, and while the vampires are definitely the protagonists of the narrative, so are the female characters. Especially in “*Twilight*”, considering that the story is narrated from the point of view of the female character, it is necessary to explore how she is influential in developing the plot of the story. The female characters in Polidori’s story too are integral to the development of the story. What needs to be analysed is how the female characters take the story as well as the character of the vampires forward. Various studies also focused on the reasons behind the immense popularity of the ‘Vampire-Romance’ genre, but again, what they fail to address is why this genre is so popular especially among females. The topic of the idea of romance for women is one that can be explored further. Why do women consider a bloodsucking creature as an epitome of romance? Finally another strong point made is that of looking at vampires as the “Other” or as victims. Although these statements were made, there isn’t much evidence backing them up. There are a few studies that look at some texts through a feminist perspective, however this is an area which can also be explored further.

2.1. Research Approach

The Feminist Literary Movement was divided into a few key events. In the First Wave of Feminism, the way men treated women, both in the society and in the novels and poems written at that time was looked at. Male novelists used language and actions that were largely disparaging to the female characters. Polidori’s “The Vampyre” can be analysed through this lens.

The Second Wave of Feminism which is Gynocriticism, involves three major aspects. Firstly, the place of the female authors in the literary sphere was examined, then the way female characters were treated in novels was looked at. This wasn’t just exclusive to how male characters treated the female characters, it also looked at how female characters treated female characters. Finally, the literature written by women was explored [Orloski 7].

The method used to conduct this study is a purely qualitative one which is carried out by the close reading of the following two texts: “The Vampyre” by John Polidori and *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer. After the close reading of these texts, the questions on the depiction of female characters and the change in the representation of vampires will be attempted to be answered.

One limitation of this study is that it focuses on two texts that are very far apart on the timeline – there is a gap of 186 years between the publications of these two texts. In these 186 years, there were numerous other texts on vampires which have not been considered at all for this study.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Both “The Vampyre” and *Twilight*, though written in completely different centuries, essentially deal with the notion of vampires. However, they do not depict the vampire as a monster, but instead depict the vampire as a being who is extremely well integrated into the society. These vampires live amongst humans and interact with them. Since both texts are classified under the ‘Vampire-Romance’ genre, it is obvious that the pivotal characters in both texts are vampires.

The first area of analysis is whether the protagonists of both texts represent the society and the culture of the time it was written in. Literature and art, are products of the human mind; products of the humans who exist within a society. Hence, they consciously or unconsciously reflect the conditions of the society. Similarly, the character of Lord Ruthwen, represents the aristocratic society of the 19th century. Polidori writes:

“But Aubrey could not avoid remarking, that it was not upon the virtuous, reduced to indigence by the misfortunes attendant even upon virtue, that he bestowed his alms: -- these were sent from the door with hardly suppressed sneers; but when the profligate came to ask something, not to relieve his wants, but to allow him to wallow in his lust, or to sink him still deeper in his iniquity, he was sent away with rich charity” [5].

‘He’ refers to the character of Ruthwen, a rich Lord, who is essentially the manifestation of the elitist ideology of the 19th century. Lord Ruthwen takes immense pleasure in making sure that the rich get richer. He provides them ample amounts of money to fulfil their greed, and mocks and demeans the poor people who actually need money. Orlomoski makes a similar observation that Ruthwen’s character represented the underlying evils of the aristocratic society at the time, by pointing out that he is generous with his money especially to those who do not deserve it [32].

On the other hand, the character of Edward Cullen in *Twilight* is fundamentally the polar opposite of the character of Lord Ruthwen. Edward is a vampire who does not attack humans, and survives solely on a “vegetarian” diet of animal

blood. In the words of Edward, “ *‘I don’t want to be a monster’* ” [120]. The very Edward who hasn’t attacked a human in over a hundred years also says to the lead female character, Isabella: “ *‘What if I’m not a superhero? What if I’m the bad guy?’* ” [122]. Edward is the character who redeems himself, by acknowledging that at his very core, he is still a monster capable of attacking a human if he gets too close to one. This quality is what made the character of Edward so appealing to the audiences of *Twilight*.

Now these are a new class of vampires who have made the conscious choice of not attacking humans. The vampires being represented in literature were always extremely attractive and alluring, be it in the 19th century or in the 21st century. These vampires were very different from the ones depicted in myths and beliefs. They were no more rotting corpses – they were beautiful creatures who first charmed you and then killed you. The only idea that has changed is the notion of vampires having feelings and being capable of falling in love. The possibility of an impossible romance between two completely opposite individuals has always been a very popular idea in literature. The phrase “opposites attract” wasn’t born in thin air. This could be a reason for the mad frenzy associated with this genre of literature. The audience laps up a love story that seems impossible, because the idea of opposites falling in love has been fed into the minds of people since centuries.

Pollack notices that the traits which made Polidori’s vampire so popular is completely missing in *Twilight*. The modern vampire is just as intelligent, melancholy, alluring and handsome as Ruthwen, but he is no more a monster. Even though Cullen proclaims himself as dangerous on numerous occasions, he is anything but that. Edward Cullen both affirms and challenges traditional masculinity. His sheer beauty is apparently not the appealing factor to the readers, but his behaviour. A comparison is made to Mr. Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, wherein the author says that Cullen too, must overcome prejudice, jealousy and the will to dominate [49]. The modern vampire stories are different from the older ones in the fact that these protagonists are about self-control and about a monster fighting his very nature to blend in with humans. Vampire stories generally fall under horror but *Twilight* could be categorized under the ‘Romance’ genre. An interesting point explored is that although a vampire’s effect on victims has always been of transformation, it has always been a negative one - draining of life and blood. *Twilight* however tells a story of transformation that is positive. [Backstein 38-39].

Lord Ruthwen’s character, though representative of the aristocratic ideology, goes against the archetype of the romantic hero which became extremely popular in this century. In that manner Polidori’s work was very ahead of its time, because it depicted a man who paraded around to be gentlemanly and kind, but was actually neither. A character like Ruthwen broke away from the traditional features

associated with a 'tall, dark and handsome man' in the 19th century. Interestingly however, the character of Edward Cullen is closer to the 19th century 'Gentleman' than the character of Ruthwen. This could be owed to the fact that the character of Edward was transformed into a vampire in the 19th century, and hence his style of speaking, and the necessity he has to 'protect' the 'weak' female character, is reflective of heroes in that century.

Another idea that is closely related to the idea of the texts being representative of the socio-cultural conditions is the depiction of women in these two texts. It is said that a lot can be said about a society by looking at how the women of the society are treated. The two texts were analysed to check if there is an under-representation of any one gender. There is a very distinct power play between the male and female gender in both texts.

In "The Vampyre", for instance, there are two important female characters – one is Ianthe, the love interest of Aubrey, and the other one is Aubrey's sister. Characteristic of the society at the time, the women are reduced to mere accessories that support the men. The character of Lord Ruthwen says, "If not my bride today, your sister is dishonoured. Women are frail!" [33]. This powerful statement was made by Lord Ruthwen to Aubrey, while referring to Aubrey's sister who he was engaged to. The statement implies that Ruthwen has probably already engaged in sexual acts with Aubrey's sister, because the term 'dishonoured' in the 19th century was used for unmarried women who had sexual relations with men. The woman would eventually be ostracized from the society. Also, Aubrey's sister, though portrayed as an important character in the story, does not have an identity other than being Aubrey's sister, and later, the fiancé of Lord Ruthwen. She remains unnamed throughout the entirety of the story. Even the character of Ianthe, with whom Aubrey is in love with is merely a prop to move the story forward. Even her death, is described in the passing, with no mention of her name, and the reader realizes that Ianthe is dead only through Aubrey's grief. Thus it is clear that the women characters, though integral to the plot of the story, are hardly acknowledged as important.

For a book written almost two centuries later, the depiction of Isabella Swan, the female protagonist of the novel, is quite problematic.

Backstein points out that while Dracula served as a cautionary tale for Victorian women, warning them about the consequences of inappropriate sexual conduct, Edward Cullen belongs to a different category of vampire. "Specifically designed to be irresistible to humans," she argues, Edward "has transformed into an alluring combination of danger and sensitivity, a handsome romantic hero haunted by his lust for blood" [38]. While Lord Ruthwen is a vague, enthralling, and extremely dangerous vampire who is driven by his lust for blood and women, Edward is a hero, and a tragic one at that, who does not even want to be a vampire. His struggles to lead

a life that is respectable, without causing harm to the human race is what makes his character so different.

Twilight is entirely narrated from the point of view of Bella, but even so, the reader gets to know very little about the character of Bella. From the moment the male character of Edward Cullen enters her life, her thoughts, actions and decisions revolve around him.

There is a power structure created between these two characters based on gender, more than being based on the foundation that Edward isn't a human, and Bella is. If Edward is commanding, then Bella is a willing accomplice to the same. A concept aptly describing Edward's disposition and behaviour is 'hegemonic masculinity' defined by Donald Levy (qtd. in Spieler) as "the hierarchical interaction between multiple masculinities [that] explains how some men make it appear normal and necessary that they dominate most women and other men" [12]. Edward conforms to most, if not all, aspects Eric Anderson (qtd. in Spieler) associates with twenty-first-century American hegemonic masculinity: "He is white and heterosexual; he is in excellent physical shape; he is self-confident, authoritative, and commanding; he is courageous, chivalric, as well as gentlemanly; and, perhaps most importantly, he is in control of himself and his surroundings" [13].

By continually juxtaposing herself and her behaviour with the unreachable perfection that Edward symbolizes for her, Bella herself reinforces the societal norm: She is positioning herself as the Other. In her ground-breaking work, Simone de Beauvoir (qtd. in Spieler) describes the process of othering, which she sees as one of the main tools in keeping patriarchy in place. A woman identifies herself in relation to man, but a man does not do the same. A man has an identity independent of a woman. The man is the subject, he is the Absolute. The woman is the Other [15].

Bella finds herself thinking about Edward when he isn't around, and spending all her time with him when he is around. She experiences severe anxiety when Edward speaks about leaving: "Don't leave me, I cried, an irrational surge of panic flooding through me. I couldn't let him go – he might disappear from me again" [240]. As a result, the reader too knows Bella through Edward, because without him, she ceases to exist.

Thus it can be observed that in "The Vampyre", the female characters accurately depict the condition of women in the society at the time – they are identified in relation to the patriarchs, first the father, then the husband and finally the son. The women in Polidori's short story are very crucial – both Ianthe and Miss Aubrey are killed by Ruthwen because Ruthwen enjoys watching Aubrey suffer. However, the women are not memorable characters, because there is hardly any space given for them to develop. On the other hand, in *Twilight*; despite Bella being the narrator of her own story, the reader only sees her life as revolving around Edward. Bella's

passions, activities and free time are all taken up either by thoughts of Edward, or by Edward himself. Edward too, plays the role of the protector, again painting the image that women are incapable of defending themselves, and Bella willingly agrees to this equation of the protector and the victim. This is made extremely clear in Bella’s dialogue, “*I wanted nothing more than to be alone with my perpetual saviour*” [149]. With such statements, the 19th century idea of women as being ‘damsels in distress’ is being reinforced repeatedly in *Twilight*. The character of Bella hence, is closer to the 19th century woman, than to the 21st century woman.

The next area of analysis is the change in the representation of vampires through 186 years. While there are stark differences, there is also one similarity that has remained constant in these many years and that is the physical appearance of the vampires.

Lord Ruthwen is described along the following lines by Polidori, “*Those who felt this sensation of awe, could not explain whence it arose: some attributed it to the dead grey eye, fixing upon the object’s face, did not seem to penetrate, and at one glance to pierce through the inward workings of the heart...*” [16]. While a detailed description of Ruthwen isn’t given, it is made clear to the reader, that he was charming and good looking enough to send flutters down the hearts of men and women alike. Similarly, the character of Edward is described along these lines by Meyer, “*I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful*” [41]. In *Twilight* the beauty of the vampires is overemphasized, with almost every time Edward appears in the narrative, him being described as either a ‘model’ or a ‘Greek-God’.

The reasons for this particular feature of vampires remaining the same across so many years is that vampires have always been known to attack with a certain tenderness. They are not violent beings, who attack like animals, at least in literary texts. They first get to know the victim intimately and then attack them. For this to happen, the creature has to be charming. And more often than not, charm is associated with good looks and charisma. This could be the reason for vampires always being depicted as beautiful beings.

The similarities end here. The character of Lord Ruthwen is that of a sadistic man who has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. At one point the reader believes, along with Aubrey, from whose point of view the story is told, that Ruthwen has changed. But that was merely a façade put up by Ruthwen to trick Aubrey. A line from the story goes, “*His lordship seemed quite changed; he no longer appeared that apathetic being who had so astonished Aubrey...*” [23].

The extent of Ruthwen’s cruelty becomes clear to the reader through the following lines, “*When he heard of Aubrey’s ill health, he readily understood himself to be the cause of it; but when he learned that Aubrey was deemed*

insane, his exultation and pleasure could hardly be concealed...” [31].

Ruthwen has remained the same from the beginning to the end. For a moment the readers and Aubrey are deceived to think that he has changed, but that was another plot weaved by Ruthwen to get closer to Aubrey and his family, so that he could hurt him more. Thus there is no character development at all, and Ruthwen can be classified as a flat character.

On the other hand, the character of Edward is portrayed as a ‘good vampire’ from the very beginning, and his ‘goodness’ is emphasized repeatedly by placing him alongside Isabella Swan, the human he has fallen in love with. However, it is not his love for Bella that makes him a good vampire. His goodness is innate, and his decision to not hurt humans was taken long before he met Bella.

Vampires were always capable of having sexual interactions with humans, and this can be observed in “The Vampyre” also. Lord Ruthwen has multiple ‘partners’. Housel and Wisniewski use Freud’s idea that love and death mark the driving forces of human existence. The fascination with vampires (or the undead) is because essentially, *Twilight* is a story that tackles both love and death [1]. A recent explosion of vampire works reveals a new emphasis on erotic attraction of the vampire rather than the fear [Luksza 16]. Even in *Twilight*, the attraction that Bella feels for Edward is primarily physical, because of his breath-taking beauty. His personality and nature are explored later, but the primary attraction is definitely lust, which is similar to Lord Ruthwen. But, Edward’s feelings for Bella are purely emotional, because he is intrigued by her ‘scent’ which was so different from the others, which further leads him to talk to her and to understand her. This is where Edward differs vastly from Ruthwen. Firstly, Lord Ruthwen was never capable of empathy, and he only used all the major characters in the story for his own entertainment. Secondly, his relationship with the females are always sexual, until he finally drains them of all their blood. Edward’s character has always been very respectful of both males and females, and he is fully aware that even though he doesn’t harm humans, he is still a monster. This self-awareness, and his quest to not hurt humans is what makes his character stand so far apart from the character of Lord Ruthwen. Vampires have now lost the edge that once defined their monstrosity; no longer terrifying, they are often (sym)pathetic or even palliative [Tenga, Zimmerman 79].

4. CONCLUSION

The first area addressed was whether the characters of Ruthwen and Edward represented the socio-cultural conditions of the society at the time. It was observed that the character of Ruthwen could symbolically represent the aristocratic attitude of demeaning the poor. But other than that, Lord Ruthwen’s character had the outward behaviour and physical appearance of romantic heroes at that time, but his actual character broke away from the mould of heroes and it is revealed that he never

was the hero – he was always the villain. Edward’s character is closer to the 19th century hero, too, probably because he was transformed into a vampire in that century. What was not expected was the depiction of the character of Bella, which brings the discussion to the next area which was – portrayal of women characters in both texts. While it was expected that the female characters in “The Vampyre” would not play a prominent role, because women at that time were not expected to play an active part outside the confines of home, the character of Bella in *Twilight* had strong undertones of the submissive 19th century woman- in the sense that her life revolves around her love interest, and she always needs a protector. She is portrayed almost as a ‘damsel in distress’, who is extremely fragile. The final area addressed was the change in the depiction of vampires from one text to another and it was found that vampires are no more considered as monsters. The fear that was once associated with these fictional characters has completely disappeared, and a feeling of love and adoration has replaced it. They are no more portrayed as mindless monsters, but as rational beings capable of feeling emotions just like humans. This shift is sweeping, but definite. Vampires as romantic heroes is a notion that is here to stay. These findings are significant especially those related to *Twilight*. The immense popularity of this book suggests that there is something about this love story that appeals to a large number of people. Apart from that, Vampires themselves are insanely popular in literary texts, movies and Television shows.

Further studies can be undertaken to uncover the history behind popular myths associated with vampires. Another area that can be explored is the depiction of female vampires in literature, which has not been taken up in this study. A larger number of literary texts can also be taken up to study the same topic, so that each time period is represented equally.

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