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From Pathology to Invisibility: The Discourse of Ageing in Vampire Fiction
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Abstract

A diachronic analysis of the way the literary vampire has been characterised from the Victorian era to the contemporary period underlines a clear evolution which seems especially relevant from the perspective of ageing studies. One of the permanent features characterising the fictional vampire from its origins to its contemporary manifestations in literature is precisely the vampire's disaffection with the effects of ageing despite its actual old age. Nonetheless, even though the vampire no longer ages in appearance, the way it has been presented has significantly evolved from a remarkable aged appearance during the Victorian period through Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to outstanding youth in Anne Rice's *An Interview with the Vampire* (1976), adolescence in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), and even childhood in John Ajvide Lindquist's *Let The Right One In* (2007), thus underlining a significant process of rejuvenation despite the vampire's acknowledged old age. This paper shows how the representations of the vampire in the arts, mainly literature and cinema, reflect a shift from the embodiment of pathology to the invisibility, or the denial, of old age.

From Pathology to Invisibility: The Discourse of Ageing in Vampire Fiction

Marta Miquel-Baldellou

Ageing and vampire fiction

The figure of the vampire has been inextricably linked to the history of humanity since ancient and classical times as an embodiment of fear, otherness, evil and the abject. Nonetheless, its manifestations in the domain of literature especially began to proliferate during the Victorian period. According to critics such as Teresa Mangum, ageing became of special interest to Victorians, while the literary vampire became the quintessential personification of old age, displaying both its contradictory and oxymoronic traits as well as reflecting some of the stereotypical values often attached to old age.[1]

Likewise, Thomas Cole also traces how the American cultural response to ageing shifted from the positive existential meaning of old age, as biblically sanctioned in the Puritan era, to the scientific normalised view of ageing which began to prevail later on, thus exploring the dualistic conception of old age as, on the one hand, venerable due to religious moral, and on the other hand, dependent and infirm due to a presumable lack of moral restraint.[9] In this sense, public imagination had to contend with significantly contradictory images of

As a result, medical studies began to focus of specific signs that would aid in categorising somebody as past his or her prime. In his volume *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (1996), Stephen Katz examines the impact of medical studies on the perceptions of old age in the Victorian period and considers how they paved the ground for the establishment of geriatrics and gerontology at the beginning of the twentieth century.[12] The body gradually became fixed through the description of a set of biological signs that would ultimately be considered as indicators of health or deterioration.[13] In this respect, medical approaches usually entertained two contradictory perceptions of how old a1(p)-3(e)-3(r4i4(d)-3( )c

It is in this cultural and social context that the figure of the vampire began to consolidate through different literary manifestations, culminating in Bram Stoker's seminal novel *Dracula* (1897), which set a lasting precedent for subsequent characterisations of the vampire both in literature and films. As Mangum argues, Victorians became fond of perusing accounts which promised eternal youth and revealed the way to prolong life, often merging medical and philosophical arguments. The proliferation of gothic narratives, and vampire tales in particular, mirrored the exaggerated experimental practices that took place at the time such as injections of crushed animal testicles, which aimed to rejuvenate and improve sexual performance, or the literal transfusion of blood, which bears a close resemblance with the vampire practice portrayed in these narratives. *Dracula* can be seen as the most popular of these narratives, portraying individuals endowed with an ever-lasting life and nourished on the blood of the youth, while echoing medical practices of blood transfusions at the time which promised to prolong youth or restore an ill body back to health. As a case in point, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's tale 'Good Lady Ducayne' (1896), the vampire theme serves the purpose of exploring the results of human vanity, centred on a young companion that grows weaker and weaker from a mysterious mosquito bite, which is eventually explained as a series of blood transfusions designed to extend her old mistress' life beyond natural limits.[18] At the same time, the religious and moral discourse in Stoker's novel suggests that the price that must be paid for eternal life is the eventual dissolution of human existence in the natural world, as the insistence on negating death and the wish to prolong earthly life, embodied in the figure of the vampire, threatens to disrupt the order which characterises Victorian society.

The portrait of the vampire and its effects on the conceptualisations of ageing

alterity, which mostly threatened the establishment, to the portrayal of heroic antagonists who no longer bear a hideous appearance but rather present a complex personality and a particularly acute sensibility which render them specially appealing to younger generations.

Taking *Dracula* as a pivotal text, as well as considering a wide range of succeeding vampire narratives, evolving textual readings have enhanced and

shadow becomes. Thus, as Victorian individuals deny their repressed instincts, their shadow, the vampire, gains a more significant presence. The vampire mirrors the Victorian individual's repressed self; the old self that needs to be subdued as the discourse of ageism begins to ground.

Conversely, in contemporary manifestations, mirrors do render back the image of vampires, who tend to reflect in mirrors leaving behind gothic clichés, since their appearance is no longer a reflection of the individual, but an inverted image which has been socially constructed and therefore is socially accepted. Stephenie Meyers' tetralogy dismantles some myths in vampire lore in an attempt to update vampire fiction, as Anne Rice had done previously, showing vampires' more human and tormented side. In the *Twilight* saga, vampires do have a reflection in the mirror. In the first novel of this series, *Twilight*, Bella looks at Edward Cullen's reflection from the back seat of a car, stating 'he glared at me in the rearview mirror.'[22] In this sense, following Jung's terminology, the vampire in contemporary fiction often reflects the individual's persona, that is, the individual's social mask, and therefore, his image often reflects back in the mirror. The change from decrepit vampires such as Nosferatu to heartthrobs such as Louis or Edward in Anne Rice's and Stephenie Meyer's vampire novels, underlines an important change from the portrayal of vampires as old to the characterisation of remarkably young characters, even though, in both cases, vampires are always much older than they actually look. However, it is important to notice people's acutely different attitude towards them, as humans flee from individuals such as Nosferatu, whereas they feel romantically attracted to young vampires such as Louis or Edward Cullen. Thus, the attitu1(a)-1(loo)c-335

accepted within the Victorian society of the time. In this sense, Coppola's film contributes an early postmodern paradigm of the vampire who transforms from old age into youth and vice

Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself.'[29] As a marker of social difference, ageing is largely socially constructed, thus underlining Margaret Morganroth Gullete's premise that the concept of age-as-loss is part of a powerful cultural construct. Even if in our contemporary Western society, attractiveness has traditionally been associated with youth, identifying ourselves with our aged self ultimately involves a sense of integrity as the aged body becomes a palimpsest of memories, an embodiment of our past. This fulfilment late in life exemplifies what Leslie Fielder calls 'the eros of old age' as we recognise, while we are ageing, that we are gradually becoming what we once desired, thus attaining the reintegration of body and memories, and reaching the last stage of a tripartite pattern consisting of difference, recognition and reconciliation.[30] In this respect, the vampire in contemporary fiction and its frequent reflection in the mirror, as is the case with Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*,[31] seems to underline this reintegration with our own self. However, this reconciliation is at the expense of rendering ageing1(o)6(f)] TJETBTf

their actual old age that is exalted and even idealised in society. The literary representation of the vampire; an embodiment characterised by old age as well as by a great capacity to defy its effects, has evolved from a clear embodiment of difference, pathology, to an unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation with old age, which eventually lies in rendering the traces of ageing invisible. Even though at first sight, contemporary vampires may exemplify the successful attempt at reconciling inner self and body image, the remarkably young appearance of vampires despite their actual old age underlines the need to erase ageing in order to identify with the vampire and thus sympathise with the aged individual.

John Polidori's text 'The Vampyre: A Tale' (1819)[32] has traditionally been regarded as one of the first portrayals of a vampire in English literature, which laid the fundaments of the genre subsequently cemented in *Dracula*.[33] In Polidori's tale, Aubrey, a young Englishman, becomes gradually initiated into the world of vice through Lord Ruthven, an eccentric aristocrat. The contrast between Aubrey's youth and Lord Ruthven's age and experience is established from the very first pages of this tale, when they both begin a tour across Europe. In this respect, the following passage underlines the contrast between youth and innocence as opposed to old age and experience, demonstrating that the experience of a lifetime, if used to immoral purposes, easily corrupts the innocence of the youth:

> It was time for him [Aubrey] to perform the tour, which for many generations has been thought necessary to enable the young to take some rapid steps in the career of vice towards putting themselves upon an equality with the aged.[34]

This rite of initiation into the corruptibility of ageing as a result of the intimate relationship established between Aubrey and Lord Ruthven is also addressed from a female perspective in Joseph Sheridan le Fanu's novel of female vampires *Carmilla* (1872), as an .090027 59524 240.05 Tm3(le.)-761 0 09524 240.05] TJ-f1 0 0 1 214.37 550.51 T

> Her face underwent a change that alarmed and even terrified me for a moment. It darkened, and became horribly livid; her teeth and hands were clenched, and she frowned and compressed her lips, while she stared down upon the ground at her feet, and trembled all over with a continued shudder as irrepressible as ague.[35]

These two vampire narratives underline one of the most enduring themes within vampire fiction, which is deviant sexuality. Sexual intercourse in old age has traditionally been perceived as taboo. According to Herbert Covey, the perception of inappropriateness of sex in old age has often been justified through physical limitations, and especially, through moral dictates, as sex in old age would not necessarily lead to procreation.[36] Likewise, aged women that made advances in that respect were perceived as evil and were in danger of being harshly penalised from a male and moral perspective.[37] The sexual discourse within vampire fiction thus also relates to sexuality understood from the perspective of ageing, as the vampire, representing old age, performs an alternative sexual intercourse, which is necessarily perceived as deviant from a social perspective, as it does not lead to procreation and eludes the Victorian moral discourse. The male vampire's use of his phallic fangs can be interpreted as a sign of male impotence in old age. The portrayal of impotence in old age takes for granted a sense of powerlessness and sexual decline with which society tends to associate with the elderly. Similarly, the advances of some female vampires seem to correspond to a last resort to retain fertility and reject menopause, engaging in an alternative and more voluntary menstruation that would allow them to remain young for time to come. Female vampires also tend to adopt a more active role in sexuality than was publically acceptable in Victorian women, especially in their old age. Likewise, female vampires' intercourse could be read as necessarily too androgynous, as a wish to usurp the role of the male, or otherwise, as a will to embody the Freudian *vagina dentata* as a sign of deviant sexuality on the part of aged women, which appears particularly threatening to men. Thus, in addition to an apparent demonisation of sexuality in general, vampire fiction particularly addresses the taboo of sex in old age.

female child as the