

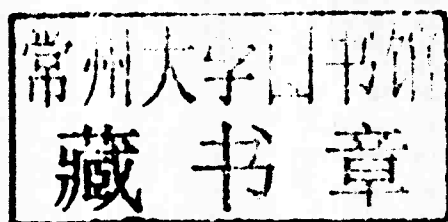
ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

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The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature

Prominent examples from contemporary vampire literature expose a desire to re-evaluate and re-work the long-standing, folkloristic interpretation of the vampire as the immortal undead. This book offers a critical analysis of vampires in contemporary popular literature, and demonstrates how they engage with essential cultural preoccupations, anxieties, and desires. Piatti-Farnell explores how, in reworking the formulaic elements of the vampiric tradition, authors such as J.R. Ward, Christopher Farnsworth, Stephenie Meyer, Charlaine Harris, and Lara Adrian have allowed vampires to be moulded into enigmatic figures who sustain a vivid conceptual debt to contemporary consumer and popular culture. Drawing from cultural materialism, anthropology, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, gender studies, and postmodern thought, Piatti-Farnell's study re-frames the concept of the vampire in relation to a distinctly twenty-first century brand of Gothic imagination, highlighting important aesthetic, conceptual, and cultural changes that have affected literary sub-genres in the post-2000 era.

Lorna Piatti-Farnell is Senior Lecturer in Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests focus mainly on twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture, Gothic studies, cultural history, and food studies. She has published widely in these areas. Her publications to date have included a large number of academic articles and book chapters, and two monographs: *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction with Routledge* (2011), and *Beef: A Global History* (2013).

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**For Rob,
and for my parents,
with thanks.**

Acknowledgements

This was a difficult project to bring to a close. There was always a new and relevant book to read, and a different angle that deserved more attention. Needless to say, I did not cover everything I wanted to. But I guess that's what future projects are for. My affair with the literary vampire will continue to demand attention, no doubt.

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Introduction

Vampires are everywhere. Vampires are the latest trend. Vampires are the ultimate incarnation of the sexy, the desirable, the coveted. They are in cinemas, fronting the scenes of the most recent teenage blockbuster. They are on television, captained by hordes of sensual characters that inflame the hearts of millions as they indulge both their violent and erotic sides. They appear in the most popular animation series, and they have conquered advertising and marketing campaigns. And vampires, above all, rule supreme in the literary world. Hundreds of popular series and successful individual novels that are centred on vampires—or have at least a number of vampire characters—populate the bookshelves of shops around the Western world. And through imaginative mystification, simulation and subterfuge, these new examples of twenty-first century Gothic are no longer just about ‘alienation and transformation’, as Jean Baudrillard put it, but hold the key to unravelling the ‘fascination’ and ‘transparency’ of the contemporary world.¹

The recent explosion of vampires in the media needs to be accounted for. This is an important part of the cultural framework of the twenty-first century that encourages the proliferation of pleasurable images within both the Gothic framework and the wider consumer context. Historically, vampires have found a prolific connection to sexual fantasies, so much that the creatures have become almost synonymous with forbidden desire and illicit experiences. The ‘sexiness of vampires’, as Justin Edwards and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet have pointed out, has existed ‘throughout the history of the Gothic mode’, thus furthering the humanisation of the monster into our contemporary moment.² The over-exposure of the vampire in contemporary media plays testament to the hyper-medicated nature of contemporary consumer culture, indulging in the fantasy of the forbidden, while, simultaneously, establishing its presence through the heteronormalised context of the everyday. In this sense, the vampire is the archetypal figure of want and yearning, the lateral representation of latent desires made manifest through the framework of consumerism that is intrinsic to the mediated contexts of popular literature, television, and film.

Taking the popularised state of the vampire as a point of departure, this book offers a critical analysis of vampires in contemporary popular

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literature. Drawing legions of fans to a distinctly twenty-first century brand of Gothic imagination, prominent examples from contemporary vampire literature have exposed a desire to re-evaluate and re-work the long-standing, folkloristic interpretation of the vampire as the immortal undead. As the fanged creature of myth finds popular status in different, and at times discordant, contemporary manifestations, it is necessary to unravel the inescapable shifts in imagery within vampire literature and, as a result, take into account how the genre engages with implications of a cultural nature. Joan Gordon and Michelle Hollinger have claimed that, by the late twentieth century, the vampire had already ‘undergone a variety of fascinating transformations’ in response to on-going changes ‘in the broader cultural and political *mise-en-scène*’.³ Continuing a line of enquiry within this critical framework, this study offers an analysis of the social, political, and conceptual implications of the twenty-first century vampire as an ambiguously coded figure and a literary trope. Paying particular attention to the changes—conceptual, political, and aesthetic—that these representations have undergone in the past decade, *The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature* explores how the metaphorical use of the ‘new vampires’ pluralises existing traditional understandings of the vampiric trope, and establishes an imagistic connection to culturally specific concerns such as genetics, corporeality, technology, consumerism, and urban landscapes. If it true, as Fred Botting suggests, that vampires have the ability to chart ‘epochal shifts’, then the post-9/11 context, with its political horror, cultural interrogations, and medical preoccupations, aids the critical uncovering of growing politics of anxiety, conflict, longing, and contested identities that have become fundamental to the literary vampire in the still nascent century.⁴

As the wider context of the vampire is brought into sharp focus, the question of ‘why literature?’ provides an important starting point. This interest in fiction generates firstly and foremost from the recognition of this medium as providing the original venue for vampiric representation, at least for what concerns the wider Western context. It is through the fictional framework of literature that the vampire reached its popularity as a Gothic creature, so much that the impact, effects, and legacy of texts such as John William Polidori’s ‘The Vampyre’ (1819), Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’ (1872), and, of course, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), cannot be denied even in our multifaceted and multi-media contemporary context. And, even in our twenty-first century context, it is in literature that the vampire finds its most prolific creative territory. The sheer amount of vampire literature produced and circulated is astounding, accounting thousands of texts on the market, ranging in sub-genre from paranormal romance to urban fantasy, thriller and historical fictions. The vampire truly is a literary monster, even if in this case, monstrosity is now more connected to high-level sales than blood-thirsty endeavours. Furthermore, literature remains profoundly entangled with the production of other media products,

such as films and television series. The majority of visual media centred of vampires in the post-2000 context has been adapted from long-standing literary series, with *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* and, of course, the cinematic version of the *Twilight* saga functioning as apt examples here. This interlaced relationship plays testament to the vampire's ability, as Botting claims, to infuse the simulations of society 'with the grandeur of new myth'.⁵ The impact and importance of literature in this discussion, therefore, cannot be neither underestimated nor ignored, even when other media are concerned. As the popularity of the vampire—and what that popularity signifies in the wider context—is fundamentally connected to literary fictions, literature itself provides an appropriate focus for analysis to uncover the representational parameters that have shaped, and are shaping, the role of the vampire in twenty-first century Western cultures.

The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature is particularly interested in exploring the relationship between literature, culture, and popular opinions and trends. In order for this to be achieved, an interdisciplinary framework is necessary. This is intrinsically connected to the subject of the study itself; in its various incarnations and conceptual contexts, the vampire refuses to be tied down to one specific aspects of life—or even death. If it is true, as Nina Auerbach contends, that vampires are 'personifications of their age' who 'are always changing', then it would be limiting and counterproductive to reduce perspectives on those changes to one methodological framework.⁶ The variations of the vampire literary canon have pointed both to a heterogeneity and homogeneity of metaphor that can only be adequately considered through a metacritical awareness of the multidimensional cultural milieu in which the texts operate. In response to the vampire's multifaceted nature, my analysis synthesises perspectives from a number of critical frameworks, including cultural materialism, anthropology, postmodern thought, psychoanalysis, sociology, and evolutionary theory. Whilst bearing an awareness of possible frictions between methodologies and lines of thought, my interdisciplinary stance draws strength from the perspectives that can be found at the intersection between approaches.

In my analysis, I am interested in highlighting differences as much as I am in finding similarities. The large body of vampire fiction produced does not allow for every text to be surveyed and discussed in detail; a fully comprehensive analysis of contemporary vampire literature is virtually impossible in one volume. Choices, therefore, need to be made, and the texts I discuss in this book are taken to be evocative representations of particular incarnations of the vampire, and not the only or definitive list. In the greater scope of the vampire imagination, similarities uncover thematic patterns that are often representative of overarching cultural frameworks and the popularisation of icons, symbols, and conceptualisations. Even though they operate on a different structure, differences point to specific contextualised preoccupations within the fiction that are symptomatic of

a particular moment in time, a particular setting, and a particular audience. In embracing both similarities and differences within the fiction as significant elements of representation, I pursue the cultural understanding of both vampire minorities and majorities. In this stance, I echo Aurbach's contention that, as one delves into the represented peculiarities of vampires within categories of literature, the 'differences among them' can be 'more telling than the surface similarities'.⁷

Following a thematic organisation that is attuned to the various 'aspects' of the vampire in contemporary popular literature, the core of this book is divided into five chapters. In charting the different manifestation of the vampire and vampirism, this study identifies specific social, cultural, and techno-political anxieties that are seen as proper to the vampire genre in the post-2000 era. Chapter 1, 'The Vampire Make-Up', focuses on genetic threading and its relationship to cultural identity. The analysis investigates two particular and seemingly contrasting aspects of the vampire experience: the idea of being born a vampire, on the one hand, and the concept of becoming a vampire, on the other. Through an analysis of mortality, immortality, and disease, the chapter aims to show that, in an era dominated by scientific experimentation and technological advances, categories of vampires emerge, and unveil underlying concerns about the state of humanity – in conceptual, political, and physical terms.

Chapter 2, 'Vampire Bodies', focuses on corporeality and physicality as an essential part of representing the vampire in contemporary literature. Vampires are now often depicted as physically superior, gifted with superhuman strength, fighting abilities, and heightened senses. In addition, most examples of vampires appear to be 'beautiful' and highly sexualised specimens that prove irresistible to humans and vampires alike. As the vampire physique is thrown into sharp relief, I discuss how, in its idealised working perfection, the newly defined vampire form compensates for seemingly unavoidable failures in the human world. Ultimately, the chapter aims to show that, through the varying representations of vampire physicality, the 'Gothic body' emerges as a mutated and ever-changing concept; as a result, a new definition of vampire monstrosity must be pursued, one that can encapsulate a shift in imagery, concept, and politics. Chapters 1 and 2 must be perceived as a continuation of each other and they are, in a way, indivisible in both their focus and analysis. As issues of genetics, embodiment, and corporeality are difficult to separate, the two chapters are intentionally connected and dependent upon each other. And while occasional overlapping may seem superfluous, the interlacing of preoccupations between the two areas shows the extension of a conceptual and cultural dialogue that puts the body of the vampire—and how it is 'made'—at the centre of socio-political and even ethical discourses over the re-elaboration of the human subject in contemporary literature.

Chapter 3, 'The Vampire's Influence', on the other hand, unravels how the vampire's mind is presented, paying particular attention to some seemingly fundamental characteristics of vampiric cognitive and extra-cognitive abilities—such as telepathy. Considering elements of 'influence' and 'control' that

are often associated with the vampire, and reaching into the multiple aspects of the vampire's psychic abilities, the chapter also pursues the association between vampires and technology, with a focus on the digitisation of identity. My analysis uncovers metaphorical connections between digital forces and the vampire's mind in contemporary literature, offering a politicised reading of 'vampire technologies' as a twenty-first century incarnation of the uncanny.

Chapter 4, 'Vampire Rituals and Customs', uncovers the importance of ritualised activities and familiar connections in contemporary vampire literature. The concept of ritual within vampire civilisations is unravelled in relation to issues of spiritual belief and cultural affiliation. Particular emphasis is placed on rituals of death, commemoration, and mating ceremonies. Eating customs are also surveyed. My analysis draws attention to how vampire habits and traditions work in connection to an extended notion of vampire collective unconscious, a recognisable thread that binds individuals within the species, physically and psychologically. My analysis also draws attention to the problematic issue of 'blood ties' and incorporates discussion of vampire families within literary cultures. In this framework, post-9/11 preoccupations emerge as important in the construction of rituality and bonding, especially when the American context is concerned.

Finally, Chapter 5 pursues an analysis of the spaces inhabited by the vampire. These are understood not only in geographical terms—ranging in focus from city dwelling to the vampire's house and places of rest—but also in conceptual terms. Topically entitled 'Vampire Spaces', this chapter surveys the relationship between geography and culture, and discusses, on the one hand, 'conflict areas' that are mediated through the figure of the vampire, and the idea of commodified existence on the other, where possession is connected to the idealisation of self and identity, and vampires themselves function as agents of both ephemerality and materiality in the 'branded space' of popular literature.

Although the book is divided into themed sections, there are some important preoccupations, tropes, and motifs that emerge as irrevocably entangled with different aspects of the vampire experience. Blood, consumerism, death, and humanity are recurrent presences throughout my study, and arbitrate the conceptualisation of the vampire as a figure connected to social, cultural, and political structures in the post-2000 context of Anglo-American narratives. The vampire's refusal to be confined to clear-cut thematic organisation is in keeping with what is perceived, as Milly Williamson puts it, as the vampire's 'troubled ontology', a conflicted sense of self that, in the literary framework, resonates with the anxieties and aspirations of contemporary Western (post)modernity.⁸

VAMPIRE STUDIES

Studying literary vampires is not, in itself, new. Countless monographs, edited collections, and scholarly articles have focused on analysing vampires

and how they are represented. In the past twenty years, important texts such as Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves* ((1995), Ken Gelder's *Reading the Vampire* (1994), and Williamson's *The Lure of the Vampire* (2005) have been instrumental in establishing the growing field of 'Vampire Studies' in the wider literary framework of the Gothic. These texts, among others, have uncovered the contextual importance of representing the vampire in fiction, and its connections to various and changing texts and situations. Scholarship has also been focused on highlighting the transformation of the vampire into a 'sympathetic creature', and how in the late twentieth century the creature made a definitive shift in personality and became entangled, as Jules Zanger puts it, with the 'depiction of emotional states and the marked experience of interior conflicts.'⁹ Overall, the critical literature of the vampire has been successful in unearthing how the creature—from Dracula and Carmilla to Miriam Blaylock and Lestat de Lioncourt—still occupies a privileged role as an image of emulation, glamour, and otherness.

Vampires, however, have also occupied an important position in the wider Gothic framework, and this important connection has not been ignored by academic scholarship. Even when not being presented as the main focus of interest, vampires have held a rightful place in research that has surveyed the wider spectrum of the Gothic in both literature and other examples from popular media and culture. Important studies such as David Skal's *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen* (2004), Jerrold Hogel's *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002), Danel Olson and K.A Laity's *21st-Century Gothic* (2001), and, even more recently, Edwards and Monnet's *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture* (2012), have been instrumental in re-evaluating the part played by the vampire in cementing the parameters of the Gothic mode in contemporary times, and the popular appeal that these 'creatures of the night' exercise in our current multi-media context.

In recent years, and undoubtedly in relation to the unavoidable impact of the *Twilight* saga as the latest vampire mainstream phenomenon, scholarship has focused on addressing the relationship between vampires, racial identities, ethics, and morality, contextual concerns that are strictly connected to a peculiarly twenty-first century re-envisioning of the vampire self. Works such as Rebecca Housel and Jeremy Wisniewski's *Twilight and Philosophy* (2009), Beth Felker Jones' *Touched by a Vampire* (2009), and Nancy Reagan's *Twilight and History* (2010) have provided a critical framework for the role of vampirism in adolescent literature. What these texts also testify to is that the vampire—once a dark creature of the night, whose instincts lay somewhere in between murder and eroticism—have been conquered by the mainstream market, and transformed into icons of change and conflict that are perfectly matched to the preoccupations of young adults and teenagers. The place of vampires in teenage fiction shapes them into creatures possessing, as Housel and Wisniewski argue, heaps of 'undead wisdom', able to make sense of matters of 'love and death', and

providing the partially sanitised dangerous image of perfection that 'we all desire to love'.¹⁰

In focusing on contemporary popular literature, my interest falls primary on fiction aimed at adults, leaving the adolescent and young adult market for another occasion. The decision to concentrate on adult literature is inspired not only by the great quantities of fiction available, which provides a large pool of primary material, but also by a critical desire to focus on issues and problematics that, although clearly present and highly developed in teenage fiction as well, find their most fascinating incarnations in literary narratives aimed at adults. In considering how popular literary vampires engage with the cultural context, my study makes an exception by largely including Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga at various points in the analysis. This inclusion is in view of the sheer impact of the literary series—and its cinematic adaptation—on the wider popular imagination, an influence that goes beyond the bound of readership and categorisation. One also needs to bear in mind, of course, the development of crossover markets, and how the wide-reaching promotion of examples from teenage fiction such as Meyer's *Twilight* and L.J. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* has had a significant impact on the way literary works are perceived and circulated.

In these terms, this study focuses on literatures pertaining to the Anglo-American context; this choice is not only a practical one, but also bears an essential critical awareness of the role vampire literature plays in the popular imaginations of these geographical and cultural frameworks, especially when America is concerned. Maintaining an awareness of the far-reaching boundaries of the genre-mixing literary category of 'vampire literature', I am constantly reminded of Botting's persuasive contention that 'vampires are mirrors of contemporary identity', providing 'the normative image' of the twenty-first century consumer, with all the anxieties and preoccupations that image entails.¹¹ In pursuing this Anglo-American, adult-orientated focus on popular vampire fiction, I recognise the impact that Gothic has had on the wider popular culture scope, and its connection to issues of consumer identity and identification that are most prominently developed in the metaphorical exchanges of the broader literary market.

In approaching the contemporary literary vampire I am less interested in discussions of gender and sexuality than I am in discovering the conceptual relation the vampire holds with important contextual issues such as genetics, hybridisation, corporeality, digital technology, scientific experimentation, luxury living, and branding. Williamson has aptly pointed out that, in their literary interpretations, vampires always address issues that 'resonate' with 'today's experience of the self'.¹² Williamson's contention draws attention to the vampire's highly contextual nature, and its ability to uncover concerns and fixations that are proper to a given time and place. The twenty-first century, therefore, has its own set of preoccupations, which have generated a different focus in the fiction. This is not to say that gender and sexuality have disappeared from the literary framework, or that

contemporary scholarship should not be attuned to these issues. Indeed, gender and sexuality have always been an important part of studying vampires and their fictional portrayals, and the core of several important studies of the literary vampire, including Auerbach's and Gelder's. Texts such as these have looked at the sexualisation of vampires—including their recent connections to perversion, blood and disease, and the place they occupy within queer theory and psychoanalytical frameworks—and they have done it well. My intention, therefore, is to concentrate on different aspects of the vampire experience that, while still bearing an invaluable association to the historical literary framework, establishes a distinctive connection to cultural concerns that are proper to the twenty-first century.¹³

VAMPIRES AS 'NEO-GOTHIC'

It is a claim of a number of scholars—notably S.T. Joshi in *Twenty-first Century Gothic*—that twenty-first century vampire fiction is part of a freshly developed form of 'neo-Gothic'. This seemingly new incarnation of the mode, while still dealing with the realm of 'fear, terror, wonder, awe and the supernatural', also owes to a number of tendencies and trends which are partly historically, partly culturally developed forms. The neo-Gothic, therefore, is 'neo' in that it encompasses preoccupations that are salient to our contemporary moment, yet manages to recall those elements of the Gothic tradition which outline the 'literature of terror'.¹⁴

Within this range of thinking, vampires can be introduced as enigmatic figures that, while owing dramatically to centuries of artistic tradition, are also deeply connected with the cultural framework of the twenty-first century, constructing connections of a social and political nature which are almost indistinguishable from the historical context in which they are placed. Several, if not all, writers of twenty-first century vampire fiction bear a conceptual debt to the Gothic tradition, and its incarnations in contemporary times. These writers draw upon a long and established heritage of Gothic artistry, incorporating—often unconsciously—popular tropes, motifs, and iconographies. The newly formed Gothic, despite taking on different undertones and a fresh, new, contemporary outfit of subterfuge, still takes readers back to the traditionally haunting themes of fear, displacement, and disembodiment, simultaneously merged with a touch of historically significant romance. In spite of this debt, however, every era remains distinctly original in its 'manipulation of character and incident'.¹⁵ That originality is connected not only to the concept of 'the vampire' itself, but also to how that concept is remoulded in view of wide-spread preoccupation, anxieties, and desires which are proper to any specific moment in time. Simply speaking, this would be a matter of both comparison and divergence: within their respective narrative trajectories, Count Dracula and Edward Cullen are both vampires, however very few would claim that they are 'the same'.

So the vampire—who Danel Olson humorously labels the ‘uberfigure of the Gothic’—is putting on a fresh masquerade.¹⁶ In spite of their alleged nature, however, both the vampire and the literature of terror are not formed in the land of the extraordinary. This particular group—in its stylistic, thematic and conceptual formations—has often been said to exist as such only when it has achieved independence ‘from religion, myth and folklore’.¹⁷ And yet, these latter forms of belief function as rich store pool of ideas on which the literature draws upon and to which it maintains a strong representational connection. The very term ‘supernatural’ necessarily implies the presence of something that is known as ‘natural’, common, accepted, and everyday. Or, to put it simply, ‘normal’. Any literary incarnations of the supernatural can only be viewed as sustainable and unsegregated when there exists a relatively clear and graspable sense of the natural. The accepted natural, however, is inseparable from the cultural context in which it is generated, and it is therefore contextual, mutable, and liable to change by definition.

The knowledge and conception of normality—and its natural occurrences—is perhaps the most inescapable basis on which the literature of terror operates, and therefore an important feature of vampire fiction within its Gothic framework. Botting suggests that in our ‘real’ twenty-first century life, just as it is in the neo-Gothic fictional lives, one can identify equal amounts of opportunity and unease: ‘anxiety floats freely, reflecting and thus ghosting the high-speed circulation of information and commodities’.¹⁸ This play with normality and differentiation allows the vampire to work its way into a number of literary—and more broadly cultural—forms. Working with culturally prescribed definitions, vampires unearth what we perceive and normal and natural by functioning as the opposite of that very concept. Floating in the margins of the remotely comprehensible, vampires are part of the literature of terror because they show the parameters of the ‘normal’ through their difference from it.

There is a tendency in contemporary scholarship to assume that vampires have completely changed, abandoning their blood-thirsty, murderous ways, and embracing love-sick performances that have very little to do with killing and fear, instead. Olson, for instance, claims that vampires have changed from the ‘articulate and merciless count, one obsessed with hierarchy and battle’ to a ‘softheaded and mumbling boy less more a friend than a fiend’.¹⁹ Disdain for the soppy vampire is almost palpable in Olson’s claim. And in his sentiment, he is indeed not alone. Judyth McLeod echoes Joshi by claiming that, while in previous centuries vampires were either respectable undead corpses carrying pestilence, or sophisticated, almost aristocratic creatures enjoying a ‘place in high society’, twenty-first-century vampires have become ‘teenagers with good hearts’.²⁰ The list of studies where vampires are thought of in these terms is long and detailed. The vampires who echo older traditions—as evil, violent, blood-sucking monsters—are often marginalised, simply accepting to take their position as ‘bad guys’, without questioning