



Research Paper

## Rise of the Undead: Creatures of the Night in Myth, History and Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** This study deals with how the vampire myths have circulated and evolved throughout history, making its way into literature. The undead beliefs are rooted in a few basic elements, based on death and after-life. People have always tried to fight death and hoped for a possible immortality. The story of the Fountain of Youth, the legendary spring that restores the youth, and the legend of the Elixir of Immortality, the mythical potion which granted the drinker eternal life, are known to have fascinated the adventurers throughout centuries. But it was life after death that remained the major cause of concern. These beliefs go a long way back, and have evolved like nothing else could.

**KEY WORDS:** Vampire, Myth, Horror, History, Legend, Undead

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### I. RISE OF THE UNDEAD: CREATURES OF THE NIGHT IN MYTH, HISTORY AND LITERATURE

This paper entitled **RISE OF THE UNDEAD: CREATURES OF THE NIGHT IN MYTH, HISTORY AND LITERATURE** shows how the undead has wandered and evolved through myth, history and literature.

Throughout history, almost every major civilization had contact with some random creature which caused plagues and death. Just like the flood myths which have so many variations around the world, there are vampire myths which are spread through the societies. These legends can be traced back to the “ekimmu” or “ekimmou” - one of the earliest myths of the vampire known to man. Theresa Bane talks about this myth in her Encyclopedia of Vampire Mythology:

Dating as far back as 4000 B.C., a type of vampiric spirit called an ekimmou was first written of in ancient Assyria, making it one of the first and oldest myths known to mankind. The lore of the ekimmou spread and survived over the years, as the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, and Inuit all developed this same type of vampire myth in parallel evolution. (59)

This ancient Assyrian belief was widely shared. Still, they were not known for rising from the grave and drinking blood, as they were rather vengeful spirits unable to find solace after leaving the body and were forced to wander around the world. They rather stalked and attacked the humans. But, not all vampires from mythology consumed raw blood, as the psychic vampires can also feed from the life force of living beings by tapping into their aura.

Even as many cultures possess revenant superstitions comparable to the Eastern European vampire beliefs, the figure of the Slavic vampire forms the most referenced root of the popular culture's concept of vampires. This popular culture never had a positive status outside the literature works, even as the situation has changed in the recent decades and the contemporary popular culture became commercially produced.

The vampire culture largely originates in the spiritual beliefs and customs of pre-Christianized Slavic peoples and in their understanding about life after death. J. Gordon Melton's The Vampire Book says: “In Europe, witchcraft and vampirism have had an intertwining history since ancient times. Many vampires first appeared among the demonic beings of pagan polytheistic religions” (809). It has to be said that they actually continued many pagan spiritual beliefs and rituals even after the official Christianization of their nations. Demons and spirits served important functions in the domains of humans. Some spirits were benevolent while the others were harmful and often extremely destructive – some of them sucked the life force or blood out of the humans while the others drowned or pushed them into the abyss.

According to them, a dead man's spirit could either bless or cause destruction on its family and neighbours during its first few days of passing. Therefore, much stress was placed on proper burial rites to ensure the soul's purity and peace as it separated from the body. The death of an unbaptized child, a violent or an untimely death, or the death of a grievous sinner could cause the soul to become unclean after death. A soul could also become unclean if the body was not given a proper burial.

All these would lead to the return of the dead from the grave to torment the living. From these deep beliefs pertaining to death and the soul, the Slavic concept of vampire originates. It is more of an unclean spirit possessing a decomposing body seeking the blood of the living to sustain its own existence – Basil Copper's *The Vampire in Legend and Fact* comes up with a similar statement:

In Eastern Europe the term *nosferatu* was used to denote the vampire, which became as dreaded a name as the werewolf with which to frighten the naughty children into good; and elsewhere other terms came into general use. But they all meant one thing: a living-corpse which carried on its unnatural life by feeding on the blood of the living. (29)

These beliefs about the vampire exist in slightly different forms throughout Slavic countries of Eastern Europe. They would be even more different in the world beyond the Slavic. These beliefs might have had the roots in the need to keep the decomposing body away from the living people, to get rid of the horrible odour that it created, and also to avoid the health risks which they caused. They were required to be properly buried, and in some cultures properly cremated. If the decomposition of these bodies goes unchecked, there could be a series of issues, both physical and mental, and this situation often helped the spread of legends in Eastern Europe.

The earliest known distinctions between the East and the West in Europe originate in the history of the Roman Republic itself. As the Roman area of control expanded, a cultural and linguistic division had appeared between the Greek speaking eastern provinces and the Latin speaking western areas. This was eventually reinforced by the later political division of the Roman Empire into the East and the West. Later, the Western Roman Empire collapsed under the frequent attacks of the barbarians from the North. But, the Eastern Roman Empire, which later came to be known as the Byzantine Empire, managed to continue as a powerful influence for years.

The rise of the Frankish Empire in the West, and in particular the Great Schism that divided Eastern and Western Christianity, enhanced the cultural and religious distinctiveness between Eastern and Western Europe. The conquest of the Byzantine Empire, by the Ottoman Empire added to the same. Later, the fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire, and the decline of the Ottoman Empire changed the divisions.

The main vampire species of Greece, Macedonia, and the Aegean region were known as "vrykolakas". Montague Summers' work, *The Vampire in Europe* confirms, "Indeed, the actual word *vrykolakas* is due to Slavonic etymology, and it is identical with a word that is found in all the Slavonic groups of languages" (217). As the Slavic culture penetrated into Greece and the Aegean, the demon-ridden *vrykolakas* replaced the indigenous Greek revenant, which was considered mostly peaceful. According to *Encyclopedia of Vampire Mythology*: "A vampiric demon from Greek lore, the *vrykolaka* ("vampire" or "wolf fairy") possess the corpse of a person who died a violent death, was improperly buried, was cursed to UNDEATH by a priest, or was excommunicated by the church" (148).

It is the kind of revenant that goes about in the dark, knocking at doors and calling out the name of someone inside and if that person responds, death comes quickly in the most violent and ruthless manner. Those who die by its hands also become undead creatures. The Slavic beliefs had slowly starting creeping into Western Europe, and from there, it managed to spread all around the world and enchant millions.

When one looks for vampire in literature of Britain, it is difficult to find anything big before John Polidori's 1819 work *The Vampyre*. Its main character, Lord Ruthven is the vampire – a mysterious person of unknown origins. He is a typical vampire of the Gothic world. He is alluring, sensuous and still terrifying enough as an evil creature. The work had an immense impact on the readers. It is sometimes believed that Polidori based his vampire, Lord Ruthven on Byron and it is a main reason for this popularity.

In Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's Gothic novella, *Carmilla* published in 1872, *Carmilla*, the title character, is the original prototype for the later female and lesbian vampires. The descriptions of *Carmilla* and the character of Lucy in *Dracula* are similar, and Stoker's Doctor Abraham Van Helsing is a direct parallel to Le Fanu's vampire expert Baron Vordenburg. The *Vampire Encyclopedia* has these to say about the character: "Carmilla is described as slender and graceful, with 'languid—very languid' movements, 'her eyes, large, dark, and lustrous.' She attaches herself to female victims, draining them slowly of life" (141).

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* formed definitive description of the vampire in popular fiction for the last century. Mary Ellen Snodgrass' *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature* describes the work: "Epitomizing the primordial clash between light and dark, Bram STOKER's ghoul novel popularized one of the world's most fearful and erotic culture hero- VILLAINS" (86). The novel tells the story of the vampire *Dracula's* attempt to relocate from Transylvania to England, and the battle between him and a small group of humans. The work has been said to belong to many literary genres especially vampire literature, horror fiction and the gothic novel.

Encyclopedia of Vampire Mythology describes the character of Dracula as follows: "In regards to species, Dracula was not any one particular type of vampire, but a conglomeration of several different types..." (37).

Stoker could be credited as the author who defined the vampire in its modern form, and the novel has led to a large number of theatrical, film and television interpretations. Ken Gelder's *Reading the Vampire* says, "...Dracula has become a highly productive piece of writing: or rather, it has become productive through its consumption" (65). Its portrayal of vampirism as a disease made a powerful impact in a Victorian Britain where health problems were common. Stoker's *Count Dracula* has remained an iconic figure throughout the ages, not just as a vampire, as he sometimes became a synonym for the word "vampire". Even the costumes of later vampires and their manners were much influenced by the description in the novel.

The character of Count Dracula is thought to be based upon the Wallachian prince, Vlad the Impaler. Also known to the world as Vlad III, the prince had spent much of his rule campaigning against the Ottoman Empire and its brutal expansion into the Eastern Europe. He had the practice of impaling his enemies, an act which struck fear into the hearts of his enemies.

Count Dracula is portrayed in the novel as having many supernatural abilities. He has the strength of twenty men and can only be killed by decapitating him followed by impalement through the heart. The traditional vampire hunting methods like silver bullets, wooden stakes, iron weapons, wild rose, holy water etc can be used against him. He can climb upside down the vertical surfaces. He has powerful hypnotic and telepathic abilities, and can command nocturnal animals. He can manipulate the weather. He can shape shift, his forms in the novel being that of a bat, a wolf, a large dog and fog. He has the ability to vanish and reappear. Still, he is less powerful in daylight. He is repulsed by garlic, crucifixes and sacramental bread, and he can only cross running water at low or high tide. He is also unable to enter a place unless invited to do so. He also requires Transylvanian soil to be nearby to him in order to successfully rest.

In the 1975 horror fiction novel *Salem's Lot* written by the American author Stephen King, a writer named Ben Mears returns to the town where he lived as a boy and discovers that the residents are all becoming vampires. It is more of vampirism in contemporary America of that time, and the vampire in King's novel is pure evil, still close enough to the most popular vampire of the early vampire fiction, Count Dracula. It can be considered as an answer to the question of what would happen if a vampire settled in a small American town instead of Europe – the wrath of the bloodsucker Barlow is unleashed into a group of unsuspecting humans.

Twentieth century vampire fiction sometimes went beyond traditional Gothic horror and explored new genres such as science fiction. A well-known example of modern vampire science fiction is Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. It is a novel set in a future Los Angeles overrun with undead bloodsucking creatures as the result of a pandemic. Here, there is the linking of science fiction with supernatural horror, and it succeeded to such an extent that it graced the theatres three times, the last occasion being in 2007. The protagonist is the sole survivor of a bacterium that causes the incurable disease of vampirism. It is also said to have influenced a zombie genre which would lead to the popularity of zombie apocalypse based movies and novels.

With the publication of Anne Rice's first novel of her popular vampire series called *Interview with the Vampire*, she brought forth a new kind of vampire into literature that would continue to be developed, not only by her, but also by others. These vampires were sensuous, and their suffering and agonies were not just physical but also psychological. Even as they were dead, their love and passion for life is presented in a beautiful manner.

Rice's vampires deviate further from the traditional vampires in literature. They are not affected by the traditional weapons against vampires, as garlic and crosses are useless against them, and the stakes going through their hearts are less effective. These vampires possess superhuman strength, senses and speed. They choose to sleep in the coffin during the day because exposure to the sun burns them and could result in death even as the elder vampires will have stronger resistance. They do not possess any magical powers, such as changing into bats, but some of the stronger, older ones have the power to fly and to read the thoughts of humans and weaker vampires.

It can also be seen that with Rice's vampires, the image of the vampire has become sympathetic. The vampires no longer affect the readers through fear alone but also in an emotional way. The vampire characters of Rice have been narrators, and they offer the feeling of being "the other". Their insides show them as morally ambiguous and continuously suffering. They do not change in form as Dracula does. Moreover, they no longer live in isolated places, as they live between the humans in comfortable, well-furnished places. The fear-generating castle on the hill is no more. They are now more human in character, and living between them.

The beliefs about vampires were everywhere, from the dark woods which surround an ancient tribal village to a grand city of modernity. Sally Regan's *Vampire Book* says, "There is the chance to use impressive powers, mix with humans, and even enjoy their company. Some vampire traits, however, never change" (23). They were still vampires, even with significant cultural and regional variations. No matter where in the world man settled or how his groups were established and run, the vampires always appeared in one form or the other.

These are the beliefs which adapted with mankind, throughout the ages, and so did the literature which surrounded them. They now stand domesticated, suiting the different cultures, people and needs.

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