

STRANGE ATTRACTORS: FICTIONAL VAMPIRES AND THEIR FOLKLORIC ANCESTORS

BY DEBORAH MARKUS

If a typical vampire of folklore, not fiction, were to come to your house this Halloween you might open the door to encounter a plump Slavic fellow with long fingernails and a stubby beard, his mouth and left eye open, his face ruddy and swollen. He wears informal attire — in fact, a linen shroud — and he looks for all the world like a disheveled peasant.

— Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death*

Before discussing the differences — and occasional similarities — between fictional and folkloric vampires, terms must be defined and the difference between fiction and folklore acknowledged. Folklore, like fiction, contains many engaging and engrossing tales which may seem, to those safely distant from the cultures that produced them, to be every bit as fictional as the stories bestselling novelists tap out. And indeed, stories from the realms of folklore are often fictional, if by fictional one means merely untrue. But this is misleading. I can leave my roommate a note saying that I spotted a mutual friend at the mall, when in fact that

friend (unbeknownst to me) died three years ago in Topeka, and the person I saw must therefore have been a complete stranger, and that doesn't make me a fiction writer. I wrote the truth as I knew it, and my being sadly mistaken as to facts in no way changes my intent. And intention makes all the difference in the world — all the difference between that repulsive fellow described above and the unnervingly attractive vampires we know from modern fiction. Folklore reflects the sometimes-desperate attempts of a people both to explain the world they see, brutal and chaotic as it often was, and to exert some control over it. Fictional menace is a luxury enjoyed by those who live in the light, possessing general plenty and longevity.

Folkloric vampires may be briefly described as no fun at all. Not just to their victims, who generally die rapidly and unpleasurably — no frisson-filled moments of terrified rapture as fangs slip into necks. But also to the student of folkloric vampires, who may be disappointed to see that these distasteful creatures have no personality at all, only lists of characteristics and possible causes.

Disappointed, and surprised as well. The fictional vampire is a creature of great, if

dark, charisma and even sympathy. Not so his folkloric ancestor. Open *his* coffin and you'll see — well, first off you won't see much, since folkloric vampires tend to lie prone (face downward), as opposed to the supine position favored by their more personable descendants. (For this, as for much of this article's information regarding folkloric vampires, I am indebted to Paul Barber's ferociously researched and eminently readable above-quoted book. All quotes not otherwise attributed are from this work.) And long before you got a glance at the folkloric's face, you'd probably be driven off, gagging, by the hideous smell of his bloated corpse. (This characteristic survives, faintly, in the occasional bad breath of fictional vampires.) But hold your breath and take a look. You're seeing the folkloric vampire in repose.

He is, like his fictional counterpart, a passive creature in his grave, which may itself be full of blood — "Spillage," Barber explains, "resulting from his excessive appetite for the stuff." There is likely to be blood on his lips as well. If you're in southern Europe, your best bet would be to try to catch him in coffin on a Saturday, when he's forced to stay in his underground home. The rest of the week, he may well be



invisible. If you're a twin born on a Saturday, according to some Yugoslavian Gypsies, you can probably see him anyway if you put your clothes on inside out. In other parts of the world, merely being born on a Saturday (twin or lone) may be enough to give you vampire vision. Or you might be able to catch a glimpse of him if you're his child.

This latter state isn't as romantic as it sounds to modern ears. Fictionally, vampires are generally children of other vampires — that is, victims of vampire bites. But folkloric vampires have many other, generally far less romantic, ways of coming into existence. A folkloric vampire, for example, was often simply the first person to die in the course of an epidemic illness. The illness didn't cause the vampirism; the vampire caused the illness. The first victim of a plague may have gone to his grave human (or believed to be human, at any rate), but after his "death" his true nature revealed itself and he began his blood-thirsty work. If this seems strange, bear in mind its essentially sound (at least in an age before germ theory) premise: the first person to catch a disease is, after all, the one who then hands it along to others, however unwittingly. Much of the heat behind hunting down folkloric vampires was therefore the wish to end a village's plague.

Folkloric vampires were sometimes those who had died of murder or suicide. Having had their lives cut unnaturally short, they may "spook around until the time of natural death." They could be those whose deaths were mourned too greatly and obviously, or not mourned enough. Touchingly, a mother might come back from the dead if her child needed her. Given that folkloric vampires often

appeared to their victims in dreams, one wonders if this particular theory of revenantism is the work of many orphans' fantasies of being avenged for mistreatment or neglect. ("I saw my mother last night, and she says you'd better be nice to me!") It is also curiously modern in its mixture of longing and unease. *Jane Eyre*, in the (non-vampire) novel by that name, ponders on the idea of her dead uncle seeing the tears caused by her aunt's present cruelty to her, and hastily dries her eyes. Better to be alone and unloved than compel comfort from that realm.

Children themselves were often thought to be predestined to become vampires. They might be quite literally children of sin — illegitimates born of illegitimates, or babies conceived on the holy days of the church calendar. (Presumably, Mom and Dad should have been occupied with prayer rather than prurience.) In fairy tale tradition, being the seventh son of a seventh son means one is destined for great things; in Romanian folklore, being the seventh son of anyone can predestinate one for vampirism. So can being born with teeth (a tradition Richard Matheson may have drawn on in his 1951 short story "Drink My Blood"). Or being born with a red caul. This, at least, can be fought against. If the parents save the caul, allow it to dry, and force the child to consume it by crumbling it into his or her food, "the threat of vampirism is ended." The caul must be red to be considered a threat, though. Redness in general is associated with vampires. Red birthmarks, red cheeks, even red hair — all were warning signs. Red flags, you might say.

There were more obscure causes of vampirism. Proper handling of the dead was a

matter of great concern, as bodies buried without the traditional rites were at risk. So were those over whom anything animate — animal or human — leapt. (Stephen King may have been aware of this when he wrote the first volume of his *Dark Tower* series, in which a character is brought back to life because a magician commences jumping over his body.) One who dies and whose brother is a sleepwalker may return as a vampire, heaven knows why. As may one whose shadow has been stolen.

So much for the causes of folkloric vampirism. What of the vampires themselves? What did they look like?

Since they were generally exhumed some time after they'd been buried, they weren't an attractive lot, as we already know. Fictional vampires are known for their parasol pallor, but folkloric ones tend to be of a ruddy complexion, and bloated. And smelly. An open left eye has already been mentioned, but sometimes both eyes are wide awake — "Evidence," Barber explains, "that the corpse is trying to warn the living that it is in the process of becoming a strigoi [Romanian revenant]." The mouth may be open as well, but fangs aren't particularly mentioned in folklore. One variety of vampire doesn't use his teeth at all to pierce his victims — he has a pointy tongue for the task.

Those who do bite, as opposed to strangle, their victims don't employ the erotic methods we've grown accustomed to from vampire fiction. Throats are out, thoraxes in. Heart's blood is especially favored, but very occasionally a victim may take a bite right between the eyes.

Just as folkloric vampires are far less arousing than fictional, so too are the methods of dispatching them. A stake through



Depending on when and where you are, a vampire of folklore might indeed appear as the ever-popular wolf; but he could also emerge in the form of a donkey, a chicken, a goat, or a horse. So stay away from farms.

the heart may be quite continental, but what about a needle through the navel? Or a nail through the head? Or just being heaved into the nearest sizeable body of water? Hardly the stuff of stirring stories and thrilling tales.

If one can't destroy a vampire, one can at least protect against it. Keeping it occupied in its coffin is best. Bread and wine were sometimes offered to corpses in the hope that these would prevent any hunger from taking a darker and more deadly turn. Or nets could be placed in the coffin. Untying the knots was "apparently a riveting occupation" for the unquiet dead, though some northern Germans apparently thought it cruel to fill the hands of even corpses with such a "torturous effort."

If, in spite of all best efforts, the dead menaced the living with their hunger, there were still defenses. Vampires, though possessed of a ghastly stench themselves, were repulsed by strong unpleasant smells — hence the still-popular idea of garlic as an apotropaic, though a cloth spread with human feces and laid across the chest (of the living, not the dead) would do as well. And though fictional vampires often share their blood with humans as a last step in converting them to the undead state, in folklore ingesting the blood of a vampire can actually protect against an attack by such a creature. One surviving recipe recommends that a fragment of the shroud be dipped in the blood of a suspected vampire. This cloth is then soaked in brandy, and the mixture of blood and spirits swallowed. "Whether or not vampires drank the blood of human beings," Barber tells us impishly, "we have most persuasive evidence that human beings have drunk the blood of vampires."

Perhaps the eeriest aspect of folkloric vampires is the fact that you can never be entirely sure if one is or isn't near. They

can, as we have seen (so to speak), be invisible; they can also take a far greater variety of forms than the skimpy list of animals allotted to the fictional vampire. (Indeed, it is the rare vampire these days who can change himself into *anything*; most modern fiction writers wish to present vampires as just like people, only cooler, and that pretty much rules out having one suddenly whisk himself into a bat.) Depending on when and where you are, a vampire of folklore might indeed appear as the ever-popular wolf; but he could also emerge in the form of a donkey, a chicken, a goat, or a horse. So stay away from farms. But be wary of going home and playing with Spike or Frisky, because vampires could also appear as a cat or a dog. Or a frog or mouse. Or a butterfly, perhaps the most elegant guise the evil can take. Certainly better than a blood-filled pod, a goatskin filled with oil, or a haystack — the latter of which, while lacking chic, is perhaps the most frightening idea of all; for if a vampire can take the form of a completely inanimate object (no blood or skin to link it to the animal kingdom), where can a poor human ever truly feel safe?

We have now seen enough of the folkloric vampire to readily contrast him with his fictional cousin. Why, one may wonder, did the vampires of old take such a turn for the better when they hit the pages of fiction and began to entertain as well as frighten?

Actually, the earliest "made up" vampires were scarcely more inviting than their folkloric fathers. Consider this description from James Malcolm Rymer's 1845 novel *Varney the Vampyre, or, the Feast of Blood*:

The face was one never to be forgotten. It was hideously flushed with colour — the colour of fresh blood; the eyes had a savage and remarkable lustre; whereas, before, they had

looked like polished tin — they now wore a ten times brighter aspect, and flashes of light seemed to dart from them. The mouth was open, as if, from the natural formation of the countenance, the lips receded much from the large canine-looking teeth.

Earlier in the chapter, it's mentioned that this creature is possessed of "long nails that literally appear to hang from the finger ends." This is especially interesting in view of the commonly held but mistaken idea that fingernails (and hair) continue to grow after death. (They don't; the skin around them merely recedes due to dehydration.) Altogether, we have a charming picture of an animated corpse. A terrifying being that seems more animal than human — and in fact he is described earlier as having the fangs of a wild beast and the fascinating eyes of a snake. No tortured philosophical soul longing to tell his story here. He doesn't speak at all, either in the course of the attack preceding the passage above or when others enter the room, summoned by the girl's shrieks. He is more zombie-like than Draculike.

In the still earlier work *The Vampyre* by John Polidori — the first piece of vampire fiction in English — Lord Ruthven is, physically, altogether human. The only hints to his true nature are his "dead grey eye" and "the deadly hue of his face, which never gained a warmer tint." He is a nobleman, at once repulsive and sought after — indeed, his "peculiarities" are exactly what the bored nobility are drawn to. But his cruelty and viciousness are made quite clear to the reader, and we are neither attracted nor taken in.

Indeed, the vampires of English literature don't seem to acquire anything like beauty or charisma until female vampires enter the scene. These are all things

dreadfully luscious, starting with J. Sheridan Le Fanu's rightly popular 1872 novel *Carmilla*, whose female narrator is at once admiring and frightened of the title character:

Her complexion was rich and brilliant; her features were small and beautifully formed; her eyes large, dark, and lustrous; her hair was quite wonderful, I never saw hair so magnificently thick and long when it was down about her shoulders; I have often placed my hands under it, and laughed with wonder at its weight. It was exquisitely fine and soft, and in colour a rich very dark brown, with something of gold. I loved to let it down, tumbling with its own weight, as, in her room, she lay back in her chair talking in her sweet low voice, I used to fold and braid it, and spread it out and play with it.

Female vampires, by the by, are practically required to be possessed of preternaturally long, beautiful hair. Mary Wilkins-Freeman's lovely Luella Miller, in the 1903 short story of the same name, has "glimmering lengths of straight, fair, hair, which she wore softly looped round a long, lovely face." She is a rather abstract vampire, who seems only vaguely aware of her true nature and apparently drains life force rather than blood. Fritz Leiber's "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes," another psychic vampire, has a "tumbling mass of dark hair." And in C. L. Moore's science fiction "Shambleau," the vampire is a sort of space-age Medusa, whose floor-length hair is "like a nest of blind, restless red worms" and yet is possessed of a strange beauty — "an awful, shuddering beauty more dreadful than any ugliness could be." Charisma, and the attraction/repulsion motif so familiar to modern readers and writers, have begun to manifest themselves.

So has intelligence, a quality entirely lacking in the mindless blood seekers of folklore. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's "Good Lady Ducayne" (1896) is only a vampire in the technical sense — that is, she does prolong her own abnormally long life by draining the blood of others, but she is nothing supernatural. Instead, she employs scientific technique and has a skilled doctor draw blood from a series of lady's maids (chloroformed first, so as not to suspect anything amiss). The vital fluid is then transfused into her veins. (Blood types were not

discovered and identified until the 1920's, and Lady Ducayne is fairly lucky not to have died from such a treatment — but never mind, it's still a good story.) Lady Ducayne has no fangs or thirst for blood, only a querulous fear of death and a longing for "a few years more in the sunshine, a few years more above ground." Conscience, not a stake, touches her heart at last. She mends her ways, though the story ends with her hoping to find yet another doctor — "a discoverer like Pasteur, or Virchow, a genius" — to help her stay alive.

Even more significant than the change from mindlessness to intelligence, though, is the shift in moral perspective this story gives the reader. Previously, the vampire, both in folklore and fiction, was a creature of pure evil, a danger to be warded off, a blight to be destroyed. Lady Ducayne is still a menace, but a strangely pitiable one. Though her "experiments" have cost the lives of two innocent young women, she seems not truly threatening, only pathetic. *Sympathetic* has yet to be reached — but the door has been opened.

And so here we are now, modern fiction readers, with our appetites for vampire heroes and villains. Indeed, it's often difficult to tell the difference between the two these days. Sometimes there isn't any. How distant we are from our ancestors shivering in the dark, wondering if their beloved dead might have been horribly transmuted into ravenous undead.

And yet we're not so different, really, from those who came before. The first question, on opening a volume of vampire fiction, is always: What are the rules here? What, in other words, can and can't a vampire do? What are his weapons and weaknesses? How can one be vanquished? Whether we're longing for his triumph or burning for his defeat, we need to know how either may be achieved. And just as folkloric traditions of vampires differed from country to country and even from village to village, with only a few basic principles serving as connecting threads, so do the rules of vampire existence shift from book to book or author to author. Each volume or series is a whole new universe in which we find ourselves alone and wondering, groping in darkness for the truth with nothing to guide us but the stories that came before.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. ~