In Jacqueline Lichtenberg’s novel of alien vampires, *Those of My Blood*, the heroine Inea asks the vampire protagonist, Titus, “Is it especially good with vampires? Or is that a myth, too?” Titus replies, “I’ll make it like nothing you’ve ever known” (Lichtenberg, 95). Carol Senf has pointed out that the very qualities that make the traditional vampire a threat in nineteenth-century stories such as *Dracula* and *Dreadful Pleasures* -- particularly his or her erotic power and unconventional behavior -- make the vampire appealing to twentieth-century readers. Contemporary authors place increasing emphasis on the positive aspects of the vampire’s eroticism and on his or her right to rebel against the stifling constraints of society (Senf, 143).

Ever since changing mores began to allow the explicit rendering of the allure that remains latent in nineteenth-century fiction, it has been a truism of the genre that sexual intimacy with a vampire is “especially good.” What becomes of this convention, however, when the vampire is presented nontraditionally, perhaps in scientifically rationalized terms?

The sexual dynamic of the prototype of traditional vampire tales, *Dracula*, is often explicated as symbolic incest. John Allen Stevenson counters this interpretation with an analysis of vampire sexuality in *Dracula* as radically incompatible with incest. Count Dracula’s predation alters the species of his victims; his mates in life, in undeath they become his kin. Vampires cannot feed on -- symbolically mate with -- their own kind. Dracula is compelled to “marry out.” “His crime is not the hoarding of incest but a sexual threat, a sin we can term excessive exogamy” (Stevenson, 139).

Stevenson characterizes the focus of *Dracula* as “intersexual competition,” in which Dracula’s predation is motivated by “an omnivorous appetite for difference, for novelty” (Stevenson, 139). The xenophobia of Stoker’s novel centers upon the threat of the monstrous Other who not only steals “our” women but converts them into a threat in themselves. The sexuality of Lucy and Mina is “released in the wrong way, by a foreigner . . . who has achieved what the men fear they are unable to accomplish” (Stevenson, 146).

Another threatening aspect of vampire sexuality (as several earlier critics have also pointed out) is its multimorphic quality. As portrayed in the “baptism of blood” scene, in which Dracula forces Mina to drink from him, “What is going on? Follatio! Lactation! It seems the vampire is sexually capable of everything” (Stevenson, 146). This monstrous Other, moreover, blurs the concept of gender, stimulating a fear of “vampire sexuality, a phenomenon in which our gender roles interpenetrate in a complicated way” (Stevenson, 146). Men become “feminine” as victims penetrated by the vampire’s phallic fangs; women devour infants rather than mothering them and take on the stereotypical “masculine” trait of aggressive sexuality. Bisexuality as well as alienness contributes to the terrifying threat Stoker and his nineteenth-century readers saw in vampirism.

Contemporary readers -- and writers -- more often see the vampire’s otherness and sexual ambiguity as alluring. Hence the more or less traditionally supernormal vampire, as transformed in the novels of such authors as Anne Rice and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, becomes attractive rather than horrible. If male, the vampire in such novels is usually incapable of penile-vaginal intercourse. Analyzing the impotent male vampire in recent novels of sympathetic vampires, Lloyd Worley describes this character as “a eunuch, a powerful, yet incomplete creature whose Satanic isolation is defined in terms of sexual impotence” (Worley, 25).

Like Stevenson, Worley emphasizes the blurring of gender roles typical of fictional vampirism. He ascribes the impotence of characters such as Yarbro’s brilliant, chivalrous Saint-Germain — a Dracula with a difference, a Transylvanian nobleman with most of the traditional vampiric traits, whose feeding brings supreme bliss rather than terror — to the essential femininity of the vampire. From this viewpoint all fictional vampires, whatever their ostensible gender, are female in their sexuality. According to Worley, “the essential psychological nature of the vampire is negatively feminine” — in other words, the character’s “femininity” is defined by his incapacity for “male sexual performance” (Worley, 29). Instead, for vampires erotic pleasure centers on “the experience of unity and sharing through oral gratification” (Worley, 33).

Since Worley’s interpretation draws heavily upon Freudian theory, it is not surprising that his view of vampire sexuality has a strong bias toward a traditionally masculine paradigm of sexuality. James Twitchell’s analysis in *The Living Dead* and *Dreadful Pleasures* shares this bias. He views the traditional vampire tale as essentially an adolescent male erotic fantasy. This approach leaves incompletely explained the contemporary fictional vampire’s powerful appeal to women readers. A more fruitful approach would be to employ a model of femaleness as an entity in its own right, rather than the Freudian model of the female as an incomplete male.

In an article on narrative theory, Susan Winnett discusses critics who construct paradigms of narrative rhythm modeled on “the trajectory of male arousal” (Winnett, 506). Suggesting that a narratology based on female erotic experience might look quite different, she points out: “Everything that the last two decades have taught us about human sexual response suggests that the female partner in intercourse has access to pleasure not open to her male mate.” Without defying the conventions dictating that sex be experienced more or less together, she can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning and representation of the ‘conventional’ heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again, immediately. And, we are told, again after that” (Winnett, 507).

On a more popular level, Sheila Kitzinger, widely read authority on female sexuality, notes the inadequacy of “the idea that the goal of every mature sexual experience should be penetration and orgasm” (Kitzinger, 36) and states, “By far the most frequent criticism women make of male partners is that they concentrate almost exclusively on the genitals” (Kitzinger, 136).
conventional masculine sexual patterns. To many female readers, "unity and sharing through oral gratification" sounds more positive than negative. The erotic appeal of vampires such as Yarbro's Saint-Germain and Fred Saberhagen's Dracula draws its power from this fact. And it is suggestive that, as Joan Gordon documents in "Rehabilitating Revenants," the sympathetic, attractive vampire is more often the creation of a female than a male author (Gordon, 130). Gordon suggests as a partial explanation that "it is a feminist vision to see power in the giver of nourishment as well as in the taker," freeing the female author to find positive qualities in beings ordinarily considered monstrous (Gordon, 223).

Saint-Germain, the hero of Yarbro's historical horror series, is attractive not only because of his nobility and high ethical standards. In the first novel, Hotel Transylvania, he rescues the heroine from a coven of Satanists, at one point holding them at bay -- in a bold reversal of the traditional vampire image -- with a piece of the consecrated Host. He also appeals to readers, as well as to female characters within the tales, because his thirst for blood involves a craving for intimacy. In "Cabin 33" he informs an ignorant young vampire, "It isn't the power and the blood... it is the touching" (Yarbro, Chronicles, 168). Yarbro's vampires, incapable of erection and ejaculation, cannot attain full satisfaction in their feeding unless the human donor reaches orgasm. Saint-Germain makes this need explicit in his lecture to a newly-converted vampire who cynically remarks that he expects to get a "good lay" from his first donor: "It is essential that she have the -- good lay. Otherwise you will have nothing." (Yarbro, Chronicles, 69).

Thus the vampires in these novels, whatever their personal inclinations, must in a sense behave "unsexfully" in their erotic encounters, making them ideal lovers. And their "impotence" makes it impossible for them to "concentrate almost exclusively on the genitals." Moreover, the union between vampire and human lovers, both before and after the donor's transformation, transmutes anything attainable in ordinary human mating. Saint-Germain writes to his great love, Madelaine, "an ocean and a continent away from you and still I feel your tread, a tremor that speeds along the veins of the earth to me" (Yarbro, Chronicles, 172). Yet Saint-Germain, like Dracula, is radically exogamous. The great sorrow of his existence is that once Madelaine becomes a vampire, they can no longer express their love physically, for, being undead, they cannot give each other the life they crave. Therefore, Saint-Germain's attractiveness combines the allure of the Other with that of the feminine ideal of a consummate lover.

Fred Saberhagen confers much the same advantages upon Count Dracula in The Dracula Tape and its sequels. Saberhagen retells the events of Stoker's novel from the viewpoint of the vampire. Setting the record straight in his own words, Dracula presents himself as a ruthless but thoroughly honorable nobleman, the victim of misrepresentation and harassment by the fanatical Van Helsing -- this Dracula appears a reasonable, even admirable human being. The vampire is a superior intellect and even good will toward mere humans," in the words of one critic (Wilgus, 93). Contrary to popular belief, he derives most of his nourishment from animal blood. He drinks from Lucy and Mina, who come to him of their own free will, not out of hunger but out of erotic passion. "The love of women I have known all my life and for me its essence does not change," the Count explains. "But its mode of expression had changed when I awoke from my mortal wounds of 1476. Since then, for me, the blood is all"

And though this author does not make the claim in so many words, Saberhagen clearly implies the superiority of vampire sex, since Lucy reaches orgasm from Dracula's bite alone. Dracula is also exogamous in this inversion of Stoker's story: he wants to postpone Mina's transformation because it would then constitute "incest, and worse, for us to try to suck each other's veins" (Saberhagen, 144) -- a striking anticipation of Stevenson's thesis. P. N. Elrod, whose model of vampirism resembles Saberhagen's, has her vampire protagonist explain, "The pleasure centers and how they operated had drastically shifted (since his transformation)!" (Elrod, 23). In this novel the heroine explicitly states her preference for vampire sex because, "When you do it this way, it just goes on and on" (Elrod, 25). Again, a vampire lover is portrayed as transcending the human male's sexual limitations. The supernatural vampire as presented in contemporary fiction, rather than representing a male adolescent sexual fantasy as Twitchell maintains, might more accurately be characterized as a quintessentially female fantasy.

Not all contemporary supernatural vampires, of course, share the traditional incapacity for genital intercourse. In movies, particularly, such as Blacula and Love at First Bite, this convention is often ignored. David M. Van Becker discusses a number of potent vampires in "Dracula's Impotence Cured?" Van Becker views this counter-trend as part of the recent "humanization, socialization, and domestication" of the vampire. Frequently, along with the abandonment of the impotence convention, traditional folkloric traits of the vampire are eliminated or downplayed. References to the unpleasant facts of death, or undeath, fade into the background. According to Van Becker, vampires subjected to this revisionist process tend to become "mock humans." The author has the widest scope for revision, naturally, when he or she writes science fiction rather than horror-fantasy and attempts to fit the vampire into the natural order as we know it. In this kind of fiction, what becomes of the vampire's traditional sexual appeal? Different authors, depending on what rationale they employ, use different strategies to preserve the vampire's allure under changed conditions. We may conveniently divide science fiction vampires into two categories, exogamous, preferring human sexual partners, and endogamous, able and/or preferring to mate with their own kind.

We have already mentioned Lichtenberg's Those of My Blood, in which vampires are members of an alien species, the luren, marooned on Earth. Since the protagonist, Titus, is a human-luren hybrid, he does not take on vampiric traits until his apparent death, whereupon his transformation -- including the onset of sexual maturity -- occurs. His skill as a lover springs partly from the vampiric power of Influence, a kind of irresistible super-hypnosis. With his true lover, however, he uses no influence but leaves her virgin.

Like Saint-Germain and Saberhagen's Dracula, he requires his partner's ardent response for his own satisfaction and therefore must confer ecstasy upon her as an inescapable corollary of his need. "He took his time, following the body currents, stimulating each and every bit of skin and deep muscle, until the currents of orgasm would move unobstructed by tension" (Lichtenberg, 119). Only then can she "ecstaticize," which nourishes him, flow into him unimpeded. His vampire nature also makes his sexual attentions more satisfying than an ordinary man's because "his hunger sharpened the experience for his bedmates, even when he used no influence" (Lichtenberg, 95). Again the allure of the alien and the feminine fantasy of the ideally considerate lover work together to make the character eroticly fascinating.

The Varkela, a people of the Russian steppes created by Susan Petrey in a series of novels in the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, perhaps the only unequivocally good vampires in fiction, pride themselves on their shamanistic healing talent and their superhuman skill with horses. Though, like Lichtenberg's luren, the Varkela possess an innate hypnotic power, they use it mainly for healing and seldom for seduction. They drink token amounts of blood from women in the act of love and sometimes offer their own blood in return, as Dracula does in Stoker's novel (and, with explicit eroticism, in Saberhagen's).
Hence he carries to the ultimate degree the isolation traditionally attributed to the vampire. 

Now only from the outside at a distance” (Tolkien, 84). As the very title of the central section of Charnas’ novel, “Unicorn Tapestry,” suggests, this link between

Joan Gordon points out that several recent vampire novels focus on “cross-species responsibility with its implications about ecology and a need for honest communication, leading to a “true partnership” between members of the two species (Martin, 144).

After a lengthy childhood, befitting their long lives, they grow into an outwardly human shape and
to know the mind of the Other, hinted at in

A central segment of the novel consists of Joshua’s telling the story of his youth to a Mississippi steamboat captain he befriends.

When an author chooses to create endogamous vampires, the traditional erotic interest is less readily available. Therefore the vampire’s attraction in this kind of fiction tends to spring from isolation and loneliness, arousing sympathy as in The Hunger, and from the allure of the Other. For example, Clifford, the nonhuman, scientifically rationalized vampire of Bob Leman’s novella, “The Pilgrimage of Clifford M.,” exemplifies extreme isolation. His kind share less in common with Homo sapiens than do any other alien vampires I am aware of. They begin life as voracious den-dwelling carnivores, more like fetuses than fully formed animals, except for their fur and shark-like teeth. After a lengthy childhood, belitting their long lives, they grow into an outwardly human shape and become nocturnal creatures living exclusively on blood. Even then, however, their nonhuman genitalia and the female’s multiple nipples preclude any sexual intimacy with human beings. The novella centers on Clifford’s search for other members of his species, for he was accidentally separated from his parents and brought up by human beings. One motive for this quest is “simple lust, but lust for whom, for what? Not any woman that he had ever met; not any man or child or beast. This most urgent drive was toward a female of his own kind” (Leman, 18).

Similarly, his social isolation is complete, for he can be neither a true vampire nor a true human being. Having joined forces with a group of small-town

Another alien vampire separated from his people in childhood and forced to discover his own nature unaided is Joshua York of George R. R. Martin’s Fevre Dream

By now we should not be surprised that Myrna finds Valance “the most sensitive lover she had ever known” (Petrey, 29): Similar attributes belong to the family of alien vampires in Elaine Bergstrom’s Shattered Glass. Bergstrom’s vampires possess superhuman sexual skill because they are telepathic: in the novel’s opening scene, the renegade vampire pleasures his victim “perfectly – as she would herself!” (Bergstrom, 3). These creatures, moreover, project a psychic magnetism that draws human beings to them even without conscious intent on the vampires’ part. This attraction is explicitly the allure of the Other, for as Helen, a vampire-human hybrid, grows into her vampiric heritage, her vampire lover becomes less satisfying to her.

Fevre Dream. Unlike most fictional vampires, Joshua’s kind crave blood only once a month, but at that period their uncontrollable bloodlust drives them to kill. Once reunited with members of his species, Joshua devotes his life to discovering an artificial blood substitute to quell the thirst. Like Clifford, Joshua is endogamous, unable to mate with human women. Male vampires in Fevre Dream are potent only in the presence of a female in estrus, an event that occurs very infrequently. Joshua therefore enlists the reader’s pity because of his sexual isolation; freed from the monthly feeding frenzy, he has no chance to mate, since normally estrus follows the sharing of a kill.

Only at the novel’s conclusion do Joshua and one of his female allies develop to the point where they can mate in the absence of the feeding frenzy. Aside from Joshua’s loneliness in childhood, his sexual isolation, and his dislike of violence, he appeals to the reader because, like Clifford, he reaches out to a human

Therefore eroticism plays no part in Clifford’s appeal to the reader. Instead, Leman elicits sympathy by dwelling on Clifford’s search for self-knowledge and the companionship of his own people. Once he attains adulthood, Clifford becomes circumspect, never killing or even seriously harming his victims. Leading the life of a wealthy recluse, he pursues his quest until he finds a group of three vampires in a rural mountain community, probably the last remaining vampires in North America. He now discovers that adult vampires gradually evolve into nearly mindless predators, “diurnally lying comatose in a muddy burrow, awakening only to prey disgustingly upon human beings” (Leman, 27). This discovery extinguishes Clifford’s unfulfilled lust, making his sexual isolation complete.

Joan Gordon points out that several recent vampire novels focus on “cross-species responsibility with its implications about ecology and human relations” and the problem of “how to behave when confronted by our first alien being” (Gordon, 231). One novel addresses these issues more directly than any tale so far mentioned — The Vampire Tapestry by Suzy McKee Charnas. Moreover, Charnas’ novel, a connected series of five novellas leading us into ever-deepening intimacy with the alien vampire protagonist, appeals to the reader by addressing the human desire to know the mind of the Other, hinted at in Fevre Dream and explored in Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire.

Charnas’ vampire, Dr. Weyland, is unique and solitary, apparently the sole survivor of a vampire species, so old that he remembers no parents or childhood. Instead he came to the ultimate degree the isolation traditionally attributed to the vampire. When he was just a pup of a quadrilla he became...
sleep he forgets the details of his previous lifetime, though general knowledge and skills carry over.

The Vampire Tapestry traces a period of development in self-knowledge that underlines his ruthless predatory nature, renders him dangerously introspective, and causes him to begin caring about his human prey. Rather than lose what he regards as his essential self, Weyland chooses to withdraw into the long sleep. As a protean creature who assumes whatever character best suits his goals during each lifetime, he does not even have a name; it is noteworthy that in the last scene of the book, as soon as he has decided to abandon his "Weyland" persona, the author ceases to call him by name.

Applying our exogamous/endogamous categories to Weyland, we find that he fits well into neither. With no other vampires in existence, he cannot mate endogamously. On the other hand, he feels no desire to copulate with human beings, though he occasionally does so for pragmatic reasons. Sexual allure, therefore, should not be a part of Weyland's appeal as a fictional character. Yet despite his scorn for vampire fans guilty of "mixing up dinner with sex" (Charnas, 28) and his contemptuous remark, "Would you mate with your livestock?" (Charnas, 138), Carol Senf still includes Weyland among fictional vampires "described as sensuous and physically ardent" (Senf, 8). Women characters within the novel display similar reactions to him. His female graduate assistant says of her desire for him, "next time somebody says they climb mountains because they're there, I'll have some idea what they mean" (Charnas, 237). His psychotherapist, Floria Landauer, unwillingly finds herself sexually aroused by his description of feeding and asks herself, "How come this attraction to someone so scary?" (Charnas, 153).

Floria later concludes that she is drawn to Weyland because he seems exempt from the confusions of ordinary human life. "All springs from, elaborates, the single, stark, primary condition: he is a predator who subsists on human blood. Harmony, strength, clarity, magnificence -- all from that basic animal integrity" (Charnas, 169). Her desire for him, then, is not rooted simply in his rugged physical charm, but in the lure of the Other. This lure is first made explicit when she asks him to speak for her, to start his perception of her attitude toward him. He draws an analogy between his condition and that of the unicorn, who can be trapped only by a maiden: "Unicorn, come lay your head in my lap while the hunters close in. You are a wonder, and for love of wonder I will tame you" (Charnas, 164).

When he decides to leave New York, reclaiming and destroying the case notes Floria has kept, she persuades him not to kill her, a task made easier by Weyland's own reluctance to do so. Though Weyland does not admit the fact to himself at this point, he has begun to care for her as an individual. "How did you grow so real?" he asks her. "The more I spoke to you of myself, the more real you became" (Charnas, 175). Even a solitary predator needs the Other against which to define himself. Earlier, Floria has suggested to him that "beneath your various facades your true self . . . wants, needs to be honored as real and valuable through acceptance by another. I try to be that other." (Charnas, 169).

At their final meeting, she invites him to go to bed with her. He accepts, clearly not out of lust (she has to stimulate him manually), but out of an attraction toward the Other like the attraction she feels toward him -- "She lived the fantasy of sex with an utter stranger" (Charnas, 176). Weyland admits to being motivated by curiosity. Later, in a letter written but never sent, he speculates on why he desired this union with her. Perhaps, he thinks, he wanted to "repossess a part of myself I had unwittingly given you," or perhaps to "touch a part of you that our speaking together had revealed to me." (Charnas, 252).

This process of touching an alien mind constitutes one of the most powerful attractions of contemporary vampire fiction. When the bloodthirsty revenant of legend becomes rationalized into a member of another species, literalizing the metaphor of vampire as ultimate foreigner that Stevenson sees in Dracula, we get a glimpse into a mode of being somehow both human and nonhuman. When we cannot prejudge the vampire as satanically evil, because he is merely obeying the dictates of natural law, we can embrace his otherness and enjoy a fascination similar to yet not identical with the traditional erotic appeal. If the creators of such characters do their work well, their vampires, rather than "mock humans" (in Van Beek's phrase) are alien beings just human enough to be comprehensible. In the words of Floria Landauer, we vicariously experience "unlike closing with unlike across whatever likeness may be found" (Charnas, 178).

Parts of this essay have been revised and incorporated in Margaret Carter's Xlibris book Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien

Reader Comments

Marked for life by reading Dracula at the age of 12, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of the supernatural, especially vampires. Author of a werewolf novel, several vampire novels, and a fantasy (co-authored with her husband), she also compiles annual update lists for her vampire bibliography (see her Web site for availability).

Works Cited


ABOUT MARGARET L. CARTER

Reading Dracula at the age of twelve ignited Margaret L. Carter’s interest in a wide range of horror, fantasy, and science fiction. Vampires, however, have always remained close to her heart, beginning with her first book, Curse of the Undead, an anthology of vampire fiction. Her dissertation for the University of California (Irvine) contained a chapter on Dracula, and its publication in book form was shortly followed by Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics and The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Biography. Her fiction includes stories in small press magazines and in anthologies such as Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Darkover and “Sword and Sorceress” volumes; a werewolf novel, Shadow of the Beast; a vampire novel, Dark Changeling, which won an Eppie Award (presented by EPIC, an e-published authors’ organization) in 2000 in the horror category; Child of Twilight, its sequel, an Eppie finalist in horror in 2004; and other horror and paranormal romance novels. Her first mass market novel, a vampire romance entitled Embracing Darkness was published in March 2005 by Silhouette Intimate Moments. Her monograph Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien was a 2005 Eppie finalist in nonfiction. Her latest books include Maiden Flights: From the Dark Places and Besieged Adept (with Leslie Roy Carter). She also publishes a monthly author newsletter, “News from the Crypt,” containing announcements, fiction excerpts, and guest author interviews.
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