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Coming Out of the Coffin: The History and Present of Queerness in the Vampire Genre.

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Coming Out of the Coffin: The History and Present of Queerness in the Vampire Genre.

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Submitted to Bowling Green State University in
fulfilment of the requirements of the Honors College Degree

With guidance from my honors advisors
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Abstract

This essay delves into the captivating and lasting influence of vampires on popular culture since their creation. The fascination with vampires can be traced back to literary works such as John Polidori's "The Vampyre" and Bram Stoker's classic "Dracula," which have served as foundations for vampire mythology across different media platforms. Despite the evolution of media and cultural contexts, certain themes surrounding vampires have persisted throughout history. Notably, vampires have been portrayed as symbols of sexuality and queerness, reflecting societal fears and desires from past eras to the present day. These themes have been critically analyzed and dissected in various iterations of vampire mythology. The historical origins of vampire lore and its evolution through different eras, regions, and creators have been meticulously examined to understand the enduring relevance and adaptability of vampire mythology.

Contemporary representations of vampires in popular culture continue to reflect and interrogate cultural anxieties surrounding identity and sexuality. This essay aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lasting fascination with vampires and their role as mirrors of human desires and fears throughout history. This essay highlights the profound impact of vampires on popular culture, from their origins in literature to their continued influence in contemporary media. The themes surrounding vampires have remained consistent throughout history, reflecting, and interrogating cultural anxieties surrounding identity and sexuality. By analyzing the evolution of vampire mythology, this essay illuminates the enduring relevance and adaptability of this genre and its continued resonance with audiences.

Introduction

Few monsters have had as lasting an impact on popular culture as the vampire since its inception. These nocturnal creatures have captivated audiences worldwide with their mysterious demeanor and eerie, captivating allure, invoking a mix of fear and intrigue. From the early works of John Polidori and Bram Stoker to the vast body of literature, media, and entertainment that followed, vampires have maintained a pervasive presence in our shared imagination since the 1800s. The origins of vampire lore can be traced back to the early 19th century, with Polidori's influential short story "The Vampyre" laying the foundation for subsequent depictions of these immortal figures. Bram Stoker's seminal novel "Dracula" further entrenched the vampire in literary history, introducing iconic characters and enduring themes that still resonate with audiences today.

Vampires have remained a fixture in popular culture across diverse mediums such as literature, video games, television, and film, adapting to changing tastes and trends while retaining their essential essence. Amidst the varied interpretations and adaptations, recurrent themes persist, harkening back to the Regency Period (1811 – 1820) when the genre first emerged. One of the main themes explored in vampire media is sexuality and otherness, with vampires often serving as symbolic representations of forbidden desires and marginalized identities. From the seductive allure of the vampire's bite to the nuanced dynamics of their relationships, vampire media has consistently grappled with themes of power, desire, and alienation.

The genre's evolution over time reveals how these themes manifest differently depending on the era, geographical location, and cultural milieu. From the Gothic sensibilities of Victorian literature to contemporary interpretations challenging traditional gender norms, vampire media reflects shifting attitudes towards sexuality and identity throughout history. By exploring how these themes intersect with broader cultural discourses, a nuanced analysis of the genre's origins, historical developments, and modern interpretations can provide a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between fear, desire, and social commentary that characterizes vampire lore. This essay aims to shed light on the enduring significance of vampires in popular culture by looking at the beginnings, early days, and the present presentation of the genre and analyze how the themes mentioned previously show themselves in diverse ways depending on the era, region, and the individuals that produced them.

Chapter 1

The Birth of the Undead

During the early years of the 19th century in the UK, the act of same sex attraction had not been given a name just yet as that wouldn't come until the end of the century. The beginning of this century would be known as the Regency era¹ and during this time period, homosexual behavior between men was illegal and carried the possibility of a death sentence. Homosexual and transgender people were forced into hiding. Taverns, coffee houses, and other businesses that could provide cover for them were called "molly houses" (mollies being the word for effeminate gay men at the time). For us to understand the deep allegories and themes surrounding vampirism in today's media, one must look at how this infamous creature came into the mainstream. It all started with a man named John William Polidori, a British writer and physician who was known for his associations with the Romantic movement². However, his greatest claim to fame is being credited by some as the creator of the vampire genre of fantasy fiction. The work by Polidori in 1819 called *The Vampyre* is a good place to start when examining the beginnings of the genre.

Polidori's origin

The interesting aspect of this story is that it wasn't even his story to begin with. John Polidori got the idea for his short story from a famous writer at the time, Lord Byron.

¹ Lasting less than a decade (from 1811 to 1820), it began when King George III was deemed too mad to rule the United Kingdom. His son, George IV, was appointed to act in his stead as Regent, or proxy ruler. And during this nine-year period, the aristocracy flourished.

² an artistic and intellectual movement that originated in approximately around 1800 to 1850. Romanticism was characterized by its emphasis on emotion and individualism as well as glorification of the past and nature, preferring the medieval over the classical.

How did Polidori come into possession of this tale? This history is written about by Matthew Beresford in his paper *The Lord Byron / John Polidori relationship and the foundation of the early nineteenth-century literary vampire*: “Byron left England for good, taking Polidori with him and travelling in Europe. They settled in Switzerland, on Lake Geneva, where soon they were joined by the Shelleys and Claire Clairmont for the now infamous ‘Summer of Discontent’, spent largely at the Villa Diodati.” The way that Polidori’s and Byron’s relationship has progressed is easily seen through their time together. This summer At Diodati, Byron allegedly challenged the party to each write a ghost story, Mary Shelley writing what would become *Frankenstein* and Byron starting a tale of a vampire that he subsequently abandoned. After Polidori was dismissed from his service to Lord Byron, in September 1816, he was challenged on the request of ‘a lady’ to turn the fragment of the story started by Byron into a more complete piece – the result was *The Vampyre*, published in 1819 under Polidori’s name.” The short story by the new author became the point where vampires were not just monstrous creatures spawned from hell, but men who walk amongst us.

[The Vampyre by John Polidori](#)

The story follows the character of Lord Ruthven, a mysterious and aristocratic figure who captivates and seduces those around him. He forms a close relationship with the protagonist, Aubrey, who becomes increasingly drawn into Ruthven's dark and enigmatic world. As the narrative unfolds, Ruthven's true nature is gradually revealed—he is a vampire who preys upon unsuspecting victims, feeding on their blood to sustain his immortal existence. Despite Aubrey's growing awareness of Ruthven's malevolent nature,

he finds himself unable to resist the vampire's allure, becoming entangled in a web of danger and intrigue. "The Vampyre" explores themes of temptation, desire, and the allure of the forbidden. It delves into the complexities of human nature, portraying Ruthven as a charismatic and seductive figure who embodies both fascination and terror. The question after reading this story is how did this one man insert the deep desires, that at the time were looked down upon, into this story as subtext³ that most audiences wouldn't be able to pick up on unless they were looking for them? How did this lay the groundwork for the fabulously queer vampires we see today?

The first way we can see these themes of sexuality present is how the vampire works to begin with. William A. Tringali explains this idea in his writing *Not Just Dead, But Gay! Queerness and the Vampire*. "The vampire's existence is tied deeply to its alluring abilities. Its horror is based not only on its bloodthirsty characteristics, but the meshing of its cannibalistic nature with a charm and allure that fascinates both its audiences and its victims. The vampire is both beautiful and terrifying; bridging this queer boundary of definition allows it to express a more complex version of non-binarized sexuality." The monsters don't discriminate who they feed on, just that they get their satisfaction, using their beauty and seductive ways to get that. Another way that Tringali relates to how this new version of the monster is automatically dripping with sexual and queer allegory⁴ is their anatomy.

³ an underlying and often distinct theme in a piece of writing or conversation.

⁴ a form of narrative that uses plot, setting, or character to stand for a message that has a larger moral or lesson or makes a far-reaching commentary on real-world issues.

The bite is a very sensual way to feed and to turn someone. While the way to turn one into a Vampire varies from story to story, the most consistent way is for the Vampire to inject their venom into the victim via their bite or to allow the victim to drink vampire blood, and then to kill the victim, have them come back to life and then have the newly undead feed on human blood. The way that these processes are focused on the neck (a common place for kissing and love bites) makes this even more overtly sexual. "The mouth becomes a sex organ, engaging in not only penetration but the birthing process by which new vampires are sired. Vampiric penetration occurs orally, via the vampire's fangs. The very nature of this action is erotic. There is a receptive zone, a penetration, and a fluid exchange, but not one that aligns with normative, heterosexual sex. The vampire is simultaneously the penetrator and the receiver of fluids, of life-blood." It is hard to see this act as not erotic when this act that is used for feeding is also so reminiscent of sexual activities.

The direct reference to Lord Byron within Polidori's published work gives a lot of insight into these two men's relationship and paves the way for how modern vampires are portrayed. The titular vampire in the story *The Vampyre* is named Lord Ruthven. This is notable due to that name being used in other pieces unflatteringly parodying the infamous Lord Byron. The Vampire in the short story is described as very posh, rich, flamboyant and a snob, all characteristics that were attributed to Byron himself. In the video essay, *A Bisexual History of Dracula*, by Verity Ritchie, the nods to Byron throughout the novel are laid out in a way that it is hard to not see this as evidence of some feelings between the two men, either as adversaries or bitter exes. "The Vampyre by John Polidori is a short

story about a young man who meets a slightly older aristocrat and goes traveling across Europe with him, but this man is inappropriately interested in the fairer sex. As it turns out, this man is a creature called a vampire. The name of the vampire is Lord Ruthven. Now, an ex-girlfriend of Byron's had very recently published a novel with a character parodying Byron named Lord Ruthven, and people knew exactly who this character was meant to be."

This is where we see the start of the most common depictions of vampires around this time, being rich aristocrats with an unquenchable sexual appetite and a mysterious allure surrounding them, just as Lord Byron had been seen by the public. Speaking of his direct characteristics, the nature of Polidori's and Byron's relationship was and still is a contested subject amongst historians. From their recorded history, it seems that it was a purely professional relationship that had some strife between the two with Byron running in circles with famous writers and Polidori being very new to the scene. However, the lives of famous authors were often very scandalous and luxurious as we see in many celebrities today. Byron's scandals are mentioned in the same video where Ritchie says: "Polidori was a young man of 20 and he looked up to Byron. Byron was 28, very famous, very sexy, notorious for his womanizing and occasional seducing of men. Until Geneva, Polidori had had most of Byron's attention all to himself, which was terribly exciting for him, but Byron was much more excited by other people in his little gang. Finally fed up with Polidori, Byron sacked him, and the young doctor came back to England alone." The two men's personal and even romantic relationship during their brief time in each other's company leaked into the novel that was written. Polidori used his writing as an outlet for his time

with and feeling towards Lord Byron, both negative and positive. This wasn't the last time that queer and sexual subtext from the authors' personal lives and from the society around them will be seen in the vampire genre.

Chapter 2

The Undead Invasion on Victorian England

The Victorian era⁵ in England was a turbulent time for the average queer person to exist in day-to-day life. While there was a culture of self-expression, the same culture was steeped in Puritanism,⁶ resulting in a slew of anti-sodomy⁷ and homosexuality laws. It is to be noted that the word 'homosexual' was first coined around this time. As the era continued, the laws surrounding homosexual behavior got more and more strict, even if law enforcement's attitudes were disinterested over the counts that were brought against these individuals. That didn't stop Oscar Wilde, famous Irish poet, and playwright, to be charged and sentenced to a work camp on the charge of sodomy in 1895.

This air of brewing tension for the queer community was the setting for the vampire genre to really find its footing when Irish author Bram Stoker, would release the now famous novel, *Dracula*, in 1897. This book was heavily based on and inspired by *The Vampyre* by Polidori, seventy-eight years prior. His work would be the most well-known author in the genre, overshadowing his predecessor with his longer form story. Another lesser known but influential piece of this history was written by another Irish author, Sheridan Le Fanu in 1872 by the name of *Carmilla*. We would see vampire media explode in popular culture because of these stories about a lavish blood sucking creature and their unsuspecting visitor and perhaps victim. However, differing factors in these author's real lives would influence how the stories messaging would come to be.

⁵ The Victorian period of literature roughly coincides with the years that Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain and its Empire (1837-1901). During this era, Britain was transformed from a predominantly rural, agricultural society into an urban, industrial one.

⁶ Puritanism is behavior or beliefs that are based on strict moral or religious principles, especially the principle that people should avoid physical pleasures.

⁷ As explained in *Bass v. State*, "Sodomy is defined as any sexual act involving the sex organs of one person and the mouth or anus of another." Traditionally, sodomy has been referred to as a "crime against nature" by various courts and statutes.

Brahm Stoker's Reign

Brahm Stoker is an interesting part of the Vampire's genre history because of his supposedly secret life that, thanks to Polidori's work prior, had made its way into the text of *Dracula*. During the time of his writing, Victorian England was going through a lot in terms of sexuality politics. No one exemplifies that better than the famed author, Oscar Wilde, whose trial for his homosexual tendencies occurred around the time of the novel's debut. A notable piece of history is that the Wilde and the Stoker family were very close knit with Brahm and Oscar running in similar circles. However, after this trial had concluded, Brahm had cut himself off from the author, most thinking because of who Oscar was or because of what Oscar's case represented for homosexuals during that time, adding to possible shame Brahm was experiencing in his own life. Scout Swonger, a member of the Berkshire Theatre group wrote the essay, *Queering Dracula*. In this piece, Swonger explains:

"While Stoker did have a heterosexual marriage with his wife Florence, the few photos of the couple together and generally cool communication between the two provide evidence of a marriage with little if any romance. Stoker was more interested in his work, collaborations, and friendships with other luminaries of the day, such as Oscar Wilde. Notably, Wilde (a former partner of Florence) was put on trial for gross indecency because of his homosexuality and sentenced to a criminal labor camp as homosexuality was a criminal offense in England at the time..."

Brahm Stoker was very aware of the public perception that surrounded the queer community during this time, even if he was in the community or not. Despite the air of

mystery surrounding Stoker's sexuality, his writing reflects the ideals of the time of sexual identity and gender, most notably the Vampire Novel, *Dracula*. This topic gets more and more interesting when discussing Stoker and his role in queer coding⁸ and allegory when some of his more secret pass times get revealed by Swonger in the same essay. "This theory regarding Stoker's own sexuality is further supported by the letters from his other male friendships, some containing extremely effusive language not typically used in purely platonic relationships. A particularly striking example is found in a gushing letter to Walt Whitman, replete with a mix of professional as well as possible personal and even romantic adoration."

I am Count Dracula

The story of *Dracula* is told through a series of diary entries, letters, newspaper articles, and journal entries, providing a multi-perspective narrative that unfolds across various locations and characters. The novel begins with Jonathan Harker, a young English solicitor, traveling to Transylvania to assist Count Dracula in the purchase of an estate in England. However, Harker soon realizes that he is a prisoner in Dracula's castle, which is revealed to be inhabited by a vampire. Harker manages to escape but is left traumatized by his encounter with the malevolent Count. Meanwhile, in England, Dracula begins to prey upon Lucy Westenra, a young woman who becomes increasingly weakened and pale. As Lucy's health deteriorates, her friends and family become increasingly concerned, seeking the help of Professor Abraham Van Helsing, a Dutch doctor and vampire hunter.

⁸The subtextual coding of a character in media as queer. Though such a character's sexual identity may not be explicitly confirmed within their respective work, a character might be coded as queer through the use of traits and stereotypes recognizable to the audience.

Van Helsing recognizes the signs of vampirism in Lucy and leads a group of allies—including Jonathan Harker, Lucy's fiancé Arthur Holmwood, and her friend Mina Murray—in a quest to hunt down and destroy Dracula. The group faces numerous challenges and dangers as they pursue the vampire across land and sea. The novel explores themes of sexuality, morality, colonialism, and the clash between modernity and tradition.

Looking at the actual text of *Dracula*, it is no secret that the novel contains overt sexual undertones and with the two leads of the story both being male, there is a natural lead to homoerotic theming. The isolation Dracula lives in and his hiding from the outside world has led many to compare this to the experience LGBTQ individuals face when in the closet and in unaccepting spaces. There are also religious reasons for this connection as well. Many Abrahamic religions have very strict rules going against what they deem as “sexual perversions and Sodomy” which is where they classify homosexual behavior. Not only this, but Victorian England was very rooted in their religious beliefs. This separation of the church and the “other” seeps its way into the tale of *Dracula* with two of his weaknesses (of many) being crucifixes and holy water. Another way we see these themes of sexual desires are the portions where we see Dracula’s wives. This topic alone would be troubling in Victorian England, which being polygamy⁹. However, Dracula’s attitude towards his wives and his human house guests, are more overt. We see him explicitly tell all his wives: “Back, back, to your own place! Your time is not yet come. Wait! Have patience! Tonight is mine. To-morrow night is yours!” (Stoker). This can be interpreted as him telling his wives to leave the man called Jonathan Harker to him first. His blood lust or

⁹ the practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time.

regular lust supersedes his wives, and he is determined to get the man all to himself before they can lay a hand on him.

Even the way the count is shown to be hovering over his victims, almost straddling them as he takes his bite is a very sensual act, as mentioned previously. This act of horror and sensuality had only ever been explored in the tale of the monster and its' relation to the pure damsel in distress. The story of Dracula puts the male in a prey role where women would usually be. The perpetrator, however, stays a man, an almost admission that the genre and the life blood of a vampire is to be queer, to feed indiscriminately. However, the genre would not begin and end with just men. Women would also get to see themselves as the creature of the night, and with the same queer coding as others.

The Original Femme Fatale

Being published twenty-five years before Dracula, the novel by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla* came out in 1872, being outshined by Stoker's work. Even through its obscurity, the novel and its eventual loosely based movie, *Dracula's Daughter* 1936, the theme still touches on similar ideas that we saw in Polidori's short story. Sexuality and queerness are overwhelming in the story but hits on a different demographic, the sapphic¹⁰ woman. "Carmilla is the story of a young girl, Laura, that was preyed upon by a vampire, Carmilla. Like other vampire tales produced during the 19th century, it was heavily influenced by Victorian anxieties about social and moral decay, homosexuality being one of them" (Panadero).

¹⁰ Relating to sexual attraction or activity between women.

However, unlike in *Dracula* and *Vampyre*, the subtext and allegory aren't met with disgust and something to be feared, but as a freeing way these women can live their life outside of the oppression of societal norms and the patriarchy. This is rare in Victorian literature where a lot of the "immoral" acts and feelings would go unsaid, avoided, or outright punished, like the other two vampire novels. *Carmilla* hits on a different fear, the fear of intervention from the outside world where it is not wanted or needed. The women lavish in their feelings and freedom, and conflict only occurs when the men in Laura's life come and intervene. The story is unique in this respect with the women being free agents to live how they want. On this topic, Isabel Panadero, author of *No Place for Men: Carmilla and Lesbian Vampires*, writes: "In Polidori's and Stoker's stories, women were just instruments..." Panadero also expands this idea further by writing: "While the homosexual subtext is there, those vampire stories never dared to cross the threshold and Dracula's thirst for Jonathan Harker was never satisfied. However, and for the first time in 19th-century vampire stories, women in *Carmilla* had an aggressive role in the narration and their homosexual desires were fulfilled."

The feminism and very overtly queer nature was rare for the time where most of the allegory was subtle and for others to dissect. The queer coding of the two women where straight audiences could see the relationship as predator and prey, is a great groundwork to what we will see in future vampire literature. The novel and its theming is very reminiscent of "Pulp Novels" that were at their most popular from 1896 to the 1960s. Pulp novels, known for their sensational and trashy literature across various genres, provided a platform for LGBT stories to be published more freely, albeit with

certain constraints. While romance and erotica were common in pulp novels, they often relegated LGBT narratives to the realm of "trash literature." Publishers, guided by societal morals, imposed a catch where queer stories were expected to conclude in tragedy to avoid normalizing homosexuality. This led to the emergence of tropes like the "bury your gays," where queer or queer coded characters faced unhappy endings. Despite these limitations, pulp novels served as a vital medium for LGBT individuals to find representations of their lives, particularly for lesbians. We can see this through the novel and how many were meant to fear and hate Carmilla and watch her meet a violent end. However, those who could catch onto the subtext, shared a different sentiment. Where some refused to see the creature of the vampire as what it is, an allegory for the sexual fears of the time and queerness, the novel *Carmilla* lays out its themes for the public to see, making this a truly impactful piece in the history of the vampire genre.

Chapter 3

Vamps are Coming Out: The Anne Rician Vampire

After the rise of vampire literature in the Victorian era, many stories of the alluring creatures of the night started popping up faster than ever before. We also saw the rise of these stories being adapted to film with *Nosferatu* (1922), *Dracula* (1931), *Vampyre* (1932), *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), and many more. While these left a large mark on how we view the queer and sexual themes of this genre of stories, now being able to see these acts laid out before us, we would have to wait until the 1970s to receive a major milestone on the

timeline of influential vampire media. A novel about two Vampires raising a surrogate vampire child together, *Interview with a Vampire* by Anne Rice, was this milestone. Her novel came out in 1976, seven years after the historical events known as the Stonewall Riots. This decade was fundamental for the gay rights movement with the first pride march being held in New York in 1970, hate crimes rising with those who opposed the movement attacking meeting places of queer activists and popular hangout spots, homosexuality being removed from The American Psychiatric Association's list of psychiatric disorders in 1973, and more groups across the LGBT community being formed to support the cause. With the good, the bad, and the ugly, the 70s was a heated time for the community and as we dive into the text of Anne Rice's novel, we can see the influence this setting had on her writing.

Interview with a Vampire is a story about a vampire named Louis. He recounts his life to a reporter he meets in a bar, sharing his life before and after his transformation into a creature of the night. He tells tales about his relationship with his master Lestat, his daughter Louis takes care of, and his relationship with the leader of a vampire group he meets, Armand. This is an interesting entry into the vampire genre due to the story being one of the only ones that is from a vampire's point of view. The vampires in the novel were very reminiscent of the ones that came before, Lord Ruthven and Dracula, being very lavish, sleek, and alluring. However, unlike with vampires of the past, we see Louis' journey through trying to not be the monster he fears he is becoming. He is aware of himself and how the world views the outsider, trying desperately to hold onto his humanity. This isn't the most interesting part of Louis's story though. When we dive into

the text, we see strong homoerotic theming coming to play in his story and with his interactions with the other characters.

The novel is laden with queer themes, especially from the 70s when it was written. This time was the early beginnings of the gay rights movement and Rice's overt mentions of the culture was no accident. She knew the connections written out in the past between the creature of the night and the gay community that has been slowly growing since the time of Polidori. George E. Haggerty writes in his paper *Anne Rice and the Queering of Culture*: "The entire concept behind the 'Theatre of the Vampires' is, after all, like the early rationale of gay liberation, partly rearticulated in the credos of Act Up and Queer Nation. "'We will make a mockery of all things sacred,' Nicholas says, 'We will lead them to ever greater vulgarity and profanity. We will astonish. We will beguile. But above all, we will thrive on their gold as well as their blood and in their midst we will grow strong'" (Lestat 265). This defiant speech, reminiscent of the politics of the "gay revolution," suggests just how threatened culture can become by the secret it hides. Rice is laying out the queer themes of the story in her writing and deliberately tying it to a real-life social movement.

There is a deep complicity between vampirism, sexuality, and culture and it plays out vividly throughout the genre and Anne Rice is not afraid to show these parallels outright through her novel. The novel doesn't only include the language of the gay revolution but also shows queer love. The dynamic between Louis and Lestat can be interpreted as subverting traditional notions of family and gender roles, offering a complex portrayal of relationships that challenge normative ideas of sexuality and

identity. One way in which the novel explores queerness is through the characters' fluid and ambiguous sexualities. Louis, for example, is depicted as having relationships with both men and women throughout the novel, blurring the lines of traditional sexual orientation. Lestat's character also defies conventional gender norms, with his flamboyant and androgynous presentation challenging expectations of masculinity.

While the novel doesn't explicitly delve into their Louis and Lestat in terms of sexual orientation, there are elements within their interactions that can be analyzed through a queer perspective. Firstly, the relationship between Louis and Lestat challenges traditional notions of masculinity and gender roles. Lestat, with his flamboyant and androgynous demeanor, defies conventional expectations of masculinity, presenting a more fluid and non-binary expression of gender. Louis, on the other hand, often struggles with his own masculinity, particularly in relation to Lestat's more assertive and dominant personality. Their relationship also defies heteronormative expectations. While there isn't overt romantic or sexual content between Louis and Lestat in the novel, their deep emotional bond and intense intimacy can be interpreted as queer in nature. Their connection transcends traditional notions of friendship or mentorship, bordering on a kind of passionate, albeit troubled, love. Additionally, the power dynamics within their relationship can be seen through a queer lens. Lestat, as the older and more experienced vampire, holds a certain power and control over Louis, shaping his identity and guiding his actions. This power imbalance echoes themes of dominance and submission often present in queer relationships, where dynamics of power and control are negotiated and navigated.

Chapter 4

Beware of Blood: The Age of the Alternative Vampire

After the age of the Anne Rician Vampire, no one would be able to guess how the Vampire genre would be changed forever. While the 70s had continued on, the LGBTQ revolution got harder to ignore by the general public with many big cities having not so secret gay bars and clubs, queer organizations, and full communities. However, in the late 70s and early 80s, America's urban centers would be plagued by a disease known as Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (more popularly known as HIV and AIDS). This epidemic would spread through the sharing of contaminated needles, blood, and semen. While many different populations were

affected by HIV and AIDS, the ones that the general population focused in on were the people of color and the homosexuals that were contracting. The media and the government demonized these populations of people, and with inaction and defamation, by the end of the decade, 46,134 people had died due to HIV and AIDS related complications. This had and still has a detrimental effect on the queer right movement with the idea of sexual deviancy being systematically linked into the community's culture and gay men still having restrictions on donating blood.

As the epidemic lingered on, the vampire genre would start to change with this new political and social landscape. While we wouldn't see much in the way of prominent literature, the movie industry decided to reinvent the vampire genre from its 30s and 40s predecessors, incorporating what the world looked like at this point. Carlen Lavigne in her paper *Sex, Blood, and (Un)Death: The Queer Vampire and HIV* explains this shift in the genre. "With the discovery of HIV and AIDS, first associated with the lifestyles of gay men, blood became a source of horror not through images of splattered gore, but through the creeping threat of decay – and blood is the focus and sustaining drive of vampiric existence. The literary link between queer, undead and blood became juxtaposed onto the suddenly immediate links between queer, blood and HIV" (2). Blood wasn't just a life source for these creatures now, but a way of sentencing a human to death, even if they did turn. While there was a distinctive horror of the creature in works prior, the Vampire was mostly this one-dimensional monster, a force of evil that our human and heterosexual heroes had to defeat. However, through the 1980s to the early 2000s, we would start to see a larger trend of looking at the struggle between the mortal and immortal. There

becomes more of a dissection of the human struggle with the gift or curse of the bite and the Vampire's point of view of their existence.

David Bowie's My Favorite Vampire

The Hunger is a British erotic horror film based on a book of the same name that was released in 1983. In this movie, we follow a wealthy and glamorous vampire couple, Miriam Blaylock, and John Blaylock. Miriam is centuries old and has the ability to grant immortality to her lovers as vampires do, which she had done with John. However, as time passes, her lovers begin to rapidly age, becoming withered and trapped in eternal life. John begins to meet this same fate, aging rapidly and desperately seeking a cure for this illness. He soon finds Dr. Sarah, a scientist researching the aging process. As John's condition worsens, Sarah becomes entangled in the world of Vampires, having to deal with her feelings for John and the rivalry brewing between her and Miriam.

The movie since has become a cult classic amongst horror and monster movie fans because of the new take that the director had on the vampire genre as a whole. This is also helped with the star-studded cast, including the likes of David Bowie. Since its resurgence, there have been many who have seen the parallels of the plot of the film to the real-world epidemic that was occurring and just starting to enter the public consciousness. The movie hits on notable themes of disease and decay, a regular sight to those who watched loved ones get sick and get consumed by HIV and AIDS and those who experienced this tragic fate themselves.

The essay *The Hidden Tragedy of Tony Scott's 'The Hunger'* explains in detail the intense visual and thematic parallels this intentionally or unintentionally draws upon. "The AIDS

crisis started in confusion. Doctors and nurses were seeing previously healthy young men with symptoms more typical of men three times their age. Purple lesions, pneumonia, and rapid weight loss soon led to death at alarming rates.” The author goes on to describe how the movie displaying this image of John pleading with the doctor to heal him and his cry: “I’m a young man. Do you understand?” hits home to the fact that a lot of the victims of the AIDS epidemic were young, generally healthy, but in an instant, were facing the horror of dying young. The whole premise of being promised prosperity and then to all at once have it taken away from you was the culture of the AIDS epidemic, especially as young queer and POC individuals found the government and wider society turn their backs to the massive tragedy that was occurring all across the country.

While this is a large part of the queer reading of the movie, there are other factors that allow this to be considered part of the trend of queer-coded vampire media. One of these factors is the inclusion of David Bowie in *The Hunger*. Bowie was a British musician, actor, and cultural icon known for his innovative music, diverse artistic personas, and influential impact on popular culture. Since the 1970s, it was public knowledge that he was an out and proud bisexual man from an interview he had given to *Playboy* magazine. This inclusion of a known queer icon in a movie that had been viewed as an allegory for the AIDS epidemic gave the styling of the film a more flamboyant and lavish look, harkening back to the queer vampires of old. However, the character of John is never seen mirroring his actor’s sexuality. That cannot be said for the other characters though. In the same essay, author Eve O Dea explains: “When Sarah and Miriam meet, their relationship, with little need for persuasion, becomes sexual...Presumably, Miriam does not discriminate

with the gender of her lovers, while the act takes Sarah by some surprise.” Dae also goes on to explain the connection their relationship has to what occurred in the novel, *Carmilla*, with the way the story shifts and focuses on the women’s relationship in the story. We see the two lay in bed together and just as Dracula had straddled and loomed over his victims in the past, Miriam and Sarah show the same act. The blatant display of queerness with an out bisexual in the principal cast was what showed audiences that their ideas of the themes in this movie were validated. This was a major steppingstone in the new age of the vampire genre where the camp¹¹ was turned up in the aesthetic and directors weren’t shying too away from exploring themes of sexuality.

Not your Grandmothers’ Vampire

As the genre of vampiric media continued to develop throughout the 80s, directors in particular played around a lot with the aesthetics, subcultures and niches these characters could occupy. In the past, the flavor of queer culture that was shown, even if unintentionally, was still stuck in rich aristocracy, flamboyance, and opulence. However, with the punk and rock movements picking up, especially considering the political and social unrest due to the AIDS epidemic, more types of vampires would start popping up in media. This wasn’t your grandmother’s vampire anymore.

"The Lost Boys" is a beloved 1987 film that tells the story of two brothers, Michael, and Sam Emerson, who relocate to Santa Carla. While there, Michael encounters a captivating group of teens led by David. He becomes infatuated with David's crew,

¹¹ extravagantly flamboyant or affected, in a way stereotypically associated with some gay men.

especially a girl named Star, and is eventually lured into their world. However, Sam grows suspicious of the group when he notices peculiar happenings and missing person reports in town. It's eventually uncovered that David and his band of boys are vampires in search of their next recruit, Michael. Michael is gradually pulled deeper into their vampire lifestyle, including drinking blood and losing touch with his humanity. Sam teams up with the quirky Frog brothers, who run a comic bookstore, to rescue his brother and safeguard his family from the vampire threat.

The film has garnered much attention for its allegorical representation of queer identity. Firstly, the director of the movie, Joel Schumaker himself is gay. We can see this through the aesthetic of the movie and how many of the scenes are framed. In the video essay, *A Bisexual History of Dracula* by Verity Richy, we are shown the way Joel inserted these themes of queerness and sexuality through his vampire movie. "Schumacker's lingering shots on shirtless men, distracting from the pretty girl who is meant to be the true love interest, suggest to the discerning eye of the more sophisticated viewer...it gay. The relationship between the main character, the target of this vampire gang, and the leader of the gang has been read by some scholars as erotic. Michael must choose between a normal life with the pretty straight girl and the super cool masc4masc life with a bunch of hot young studs who like to drink the blood of other hot young studs" (13:01). As mentioned, the character of David, portrayed by Kiefer Sutherland, is often interpreted as representing homoerotic tendencies and his relationship with Michael, the protagonist, is viewed as a potent metaphor for the allure of queer identity and the confusion and fear that can come with discovering one's own sexuality.

This interpretation suggests that David and his vampire gang represent queer individuals who are excluded from mainstream society, living on the periphery, and rejecting conventional norms in favor of their own rules. David has to choose between his human life with the girl of his dreams and a life as an immortal creature of the night with a gang of other teen boys. This is a parallel to the experiences of many queer people who have historically been marginalized and forced to live outside the norm, choosing between the safety of regular life and being true to themselves. David's seduction of Michael and his attempts to draw him into the vampire lifestyle can be seen as a metaphor for the allure of queer identity. Michael's transformation into a vampire can be interpreted as a powerful metaphor for coming out and embracing one's true self, despite societal pressures. The themes of rebellion against societal norms, otherness, and the search for identity in *The Lost Boys* have resonated with many queer viewers, making it a beloved movie within the LGBTQ+ community.

Chapter 5

Queering the Vampire: Vampire TV before and after Obergefell v. Hodges

After the era of turbulent 1970s and 80s, the fight for gay rights did not just fizzle out. The 90s and early 2000s were marked by calls for political change after the government had dragged its feet and mostly turned a blind eye during the AIDS epidemic. While minimal, the 1990s and the early 2000s saw a few milestones in the way of queer rights with 1993 seeing queer individuals being allowed into the military with “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell”, 1997 having the first Lesbian on a major sitcom, that being Ellen DeGeneres on the show *Ellen*, 2004 seeing the first legal same-sex marriage taking place, and California and New Jersey legalizing same-sex marriage all together in the following two years. While these milestones seem to be few in numbers, these would pave the way for more rights in the 2010s and to our present with the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 2008 (allowing gay and lesbian individuals to serve freely and non-secretly in the military), the 2013 repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act (officially stating that limiting marriage to only heterosexual individuals was unconstitutional), and the federal legalization of gay marriage in 2015. As more and more rights were being granted to the queer community, we saw and continue to see a huge rise in LGBTQ+ characters and story lines in our media, without (mostly) subtext and allegory, but this time, out in plain view. From the early

2000s onward, we can see this trend of the queer vampire being out and proud, starting back before gay marriage was even legalized.

Vampires post-AIDS Epidemic

True Blood was an HBO TV series based on the book series "The Southern Vampire Mysteries" by Charlaine Harris. The show explores the complexities of a world where vampires are now known to the public. The story is set in Bon Temps, Louisiana, and follows the lives of humans and vampires as they deal with the consequences of this revelation. The series aired from 2008 to 2014, providing a glimpse into a society undergoing transformation as supernatural beings integrate into mainstream culture. The show intertwines stories of interpersonal relationships, political intrigue, and moral dilemmas, all while depicting the ever-present tension between humans and vampires. Set in Bon Temps, the series captures the intrigue of American culture and society on a miniscule level. The diverse experiences and reactions of the central characters reflect the broader spectrum of human and vampire existence across the United States.

Already we can see these clear and present themes of the social minority with the population of vampires being a stand in for the "other". While this allegory can apply to any marginalized group, the way the vampires lived in secret and shame and now are allowing themselves to be known, being unashamed of themselves, is pretty emblematic of the queer revolution of the 1960s and at the time, the current rise of LGBT rights and figure heads. The vampires in the world of *True Blood* are experiencing what many queer people were experiencing after the AIDS Epidemic, becoming a main stay in the public eye. In the paper *Not Just Dead, but Gay! Queerness and the Vampire*, our author William

Trengail describes this integration of the social minority “Vampires within the world of True Blood are able to mainstream because of their ingestion of ‘Tru Blood’ a synthesized drink that eliminates their need to feed on humans. Vampires are suddenly brought, ‘out of the coffin’, a term obviously based on the queer term coming out ‘of the closet’, highlighting the show’s representation of queerness through the vampire” (54). The use of these phrases is very interesting when looking at the context of the time the show takes place and the themes of integration and acceptance. We also see the issue of monster and human marriages, While this story line can be seen as an allegory for interracial marriage, the want to fit in through marriage and that being a vehicle for acceptance and integration into society and there being a side fighting for it and a side thinking that fighting for this change would make the movement look like a joke is how many queer people before the legalization of same-sex marriage saw the issue themselves. Marriage mirroring the heteronormativity view was seen to be accepted, as monogamy¹² was still a topic of importance in discussions surrounding relationships and if you’re married, you will “forever” be monogamous.

The characters within the show itself are very fluid with their sexuality and even the show’s creator, Alan Ball, made a point of saying that most vampires are “just inherently bisexual”. While the show came out in the years following the AIDS epidemic, the book it was based on came out right as the 90s were ending and we can see common story lines and themes seep into the show. One of these main story lines that made it through adaptation was the introduction of Hep V. This was a blood disease that vampires got

¹² the practice or state of being married to one person at a time.

from drinking contaminated blood. In the same video essay mentioned before, *A Bisexual History of Dracula*, Verity Richy explains: “True Blood features a virus called Hep V, which in the book is literally called Vampire AIDS, changed for the tv show probably to avoid the particularly offensive connotations” (16:51). Even without the more problematic name, we can see the allegory that is coming through to the real-life AIDS epidemic. However, as the 2000s went on we would see less AIDS allegory when discussing vampires and more outright queerness in the characters and story lines.

When Vamps say Gay

What We Do in the Shadows is a 2019 show based on the feature film of the same name from Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi. The show is a documentary-style look into the daily or rather, nightly lives of four vampire roommates, Nandor the Relentless, Laszlo, Nadia, Colin Robinson who have been together for hundreds of years in Staten Island. They are cared for by a human familiar¹³, Guillermo de la Cruz, who hopes to someday be turned into a vampire by Nandor, his master. The show follows their “lives” as they continuously try and take over Staten Island and get used to the modern and human world around them, learning more about each other and themselves along the way.

This show has been praised for its subversion of the vampire genre in more ways than one, especially, funnily enough, allowing the characters to feel more human and helping the audience get to know them through the mockumentary film making style. This intimate look into their lives allows for the show to delve into the interpersonal

¹³ A familiar is a vampire's companion. Think of it like a little pet. They do whatever their masters wish for. Their life force is now linked together with yours. But some stronger familiars do have a will of their own.

relationships of these characters and through that comes notable mentions of queerness and sexuality on multiple occasions. The show never shy's away from these themes. From the article *How What We Do in The Shadows taps into the inherent queerness of vampires* by Gabrielle Sanchez: "While the show has long incorporated elements of queerness within its storylines, this latest batch of episodes has ramped everything up a few notches, really delving into the queerness of its polyamorous¹⁴ household. With its flashes of blatant homoeroticism, *What We Do in The Shadows* honors a long tradition within vampire lore: the show's lustful, blood-sucking creatures of the night are part of a storied history of queer readings dating to the inception of the genre."

As the series goes on, we get more and more details of these characters' pasts with their prior relationships and sexual exploits. They are not shy when discussing these topics, and that does a lot for the queer genre, not tiptoeing around their identities and sexual habits. The core vampires are where we see most of these conversations pop up due to them being around for centuries. We see as they struggle to fit into "normative" society and mostly hiding themselves away, usually only in the company of each other. This is reminiscent of a lot of queer individuals, usually preferring the company of other queer persons because of the understanding they have with one another. The house the characters reside in acts as their safe space, where humans (other than their familiar and the occasional meal) are prohibited. The characters work to validate and cement their place in the human world, joining politics, getting acquainted with their human neighbors,

¹⁴ Polyamory is a form of ethical, or consensual, non-monogamy that involves having romantic or sexual relationships with multiple partners at the same time.

teaching community college, dating, etc., while keeping their allegiance with their vampire community. In the same essay by Sanchez, he notes:

These creatures of the night satiate their hunger for the life force of the human body, and in essence, the body itself. They are predominantly *defined* by their desires—material and sexual. To put it plainly, they are beautiful, human-esque beings who use penetration to suck and sometimes exchange blood. This penetration can be performed by any vampire—man or woman—and can be performed on any person, leveling the playing field for any attraction or potential relationship.

This idea of the immortal being with bloodlust and sexual lust for anyone, regardless of gender is greatly present in the show. Lazlo and Nandor are seen to have had sexual exploits with both genders, Nandor having many wives and as he puts it, wives can be both men and women, and Lazlo having sexual encounters with the likes of the Baron, their vampire leader, and others, even doing porn at one time. One of the first episodes centered around a yearly vampire orgy that the main cast is hosting. Guillermo, the human familiar, is also gay, having hinted at feelings for his master Nandor, wanting to become a vampire ever since seeing *Interview with a Vampire* and being a descendant of the vampire slayer, Van Helsing. With the diversity of the cast and the current era of queer acceptance we are living in, we see how the present of vampire media has become outright, well, gay.

Chapter 6

What the Suck? Queer Theory and Allegory: Why it Matters.

Allegory and queer theory¹⁵ are essential tools used in analyzing media, providing valuable insights into the complex layers of representation, identity, and power dynamics within texts. Allegory enables scholars to dissect hidden messages and evaluate societal norms that are ingrained in media productions. It is particularly useful for analyzing the portrayal of marginalized groups, especially those within sexual and gender minorities, and for assessing how dominant ideologies are either reinforced or challenged. On the other hand, queer theory offers a critical framework for exploring the fluidity and diversity of gender and sexual identities depicted in media. It examines heteronormative narratives and uncovers queer subtexts, emphasizing the importance of representation and visibility for LGBTQ+ communities. Together, allegory and queer theory enrich media studies by exposing hidden meanings, questioning dominant narratives, and advocating for more inclusive and diverse representations in media. Although the terms "allegory" and "queer theory" are relatively new in popular culture studies, they have roots in both queer culture and the history of media itself. Understanding their significance to the exploration of queerness in vampire media requires exploring the history of queer subtext in media overall.

¹⁵ an interdisciplinary field that encourages one to look at the world through new avenues. It is a way of thinking that dismantles traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities, challenges traditional academic approaches, and fights against social inequality.

The Hayes Code and other Restrictions on Media

One of the most well-known examples of the restriction of queerness in media would be the Hayes Code of the 1930s. This set of self-imposed guidelines within the movie industry was a way to ensure that the government stayed out of the creative process, making any taboo topic for the time banned from appearing on the big screen. One of the aforementioned topics was what was known as “sexual perversion”, anything acting outside of heterosexual, monogamous marriage. This caused strife for the community that wanted to see themselves represented on screen and queer creatives that wished to share their unique and interesting stories. In the article, *The Hays Code & Queer Coding Villains in Hollywood*, it is explained how this had led to a wave of allegorical queerness in media, never said but there, nonetheless. “As a result, filmmakers were forced to find subtle ways of including LGBTQ+ characters in their projects without openly acknowledging their sexuality. This practice, known as ‘queer coding’, saw LGBTQ+ characters represented through a series of negative stereotypes and exaggerated mannerisms, often as villainous characters.” While these portrayals were less than favorable for the queer community, bad representation was often better than none at all and this was the way it had to be. Similar restrictions were in place for comic books and novels, as mentioned before with the rise of pulp fiction novels. These rules and regulations lead to a whole cult following these bad-faith portrayals and the reclaiming of these characters. That is why today we see so many queer individuals connecting with the horror genre and rooting for the villain.

What Now?

In the year 2024, the Queer community has grown to be larger than ever before. Cities all over the world celebrate this community by holding pride parades regularly. Many celebrities have come out and are living freely without fear of jeopardizing their careers due to their sexuality or gender identity. An increase in queer-centric media in literature, TV shows, movies, and music can be observed without the allegory and coding of the past. While this is a positive trend that seems to have no end in sight, we must be mindful of the forces that are against the community. The banning of material containing racial and queer themes is happening in schools and libraries across the country, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is taking effect, trying to set back the equal rights movement, and there is a threat of Project 2025¹⁶. These events are concerning for the future of queer individuals and the media that represents them. To prevent going back to a time of demonization, villainization, and cultural erasure, we must make our voices heard through voting, protest, awareness, and educating those who might be ignorant on the subject. Minority rights will always be under attack, which is why we must remain socially and politically aware, whether we are members of the community or allies.

¹⁶ Project 2025 consists largely of a book of policy recommendations. Reactions to the plan included variously describing it as authoritarian, an attempt by Trump to become a dictator, and a path leading the United States towards autocracy, with several experts in law criticizing it for violating current constitutional laws that would undermine the rule of law and the separation of powers. Additionally, some conservatives and Republicans also criticized the plan, for example in relation to climate change. The Mandate states that "freedom is defined by God, not man".

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The exploration of queer allegory and queer coding within vampire media reveals a fascinating journey through the interplay of societal anxieties, cultural shifts, and the constant search for identity representation. From early gothic literature to contemporary film and television, vampires have served as a canvas upon which creators have painted complex narratives of otherness, desire, and defiance. Through the lens of queer allegory, vampires have represented the marginalized, the misunderstood, and the ostracized, echoing the struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals throughout history. From Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, these immortal beings have exemplified the societal fears and fantasies surrounding sexuality, gender, and the fluidity of identity. Their existence as outsiders, perpetually existing on the fringes of society, resonates deeply with queer experiences of separation and longing for acceptance.

The phenomenon of queer coding within vampire media further emphasizes the nuanced relationship between representation and subtext. Whether it be the flamboyant mannerisms of classic Hollywood vampires or the subtle hints of same-sex attraction in contemporary series, these coded elements offer a sanctuary for LGBTQ+ audiences to find themselves reflected in the media they consume. Yet, they also serve as a reminder of the constraints inflicted by societal norms, forcing creators and audiences alike to navigate the balance between visibility and censorship.

Nevertheless, as society continues to evolve and embrace diverse narratives, the landscape of vampire media is likewise transforming. Recent years have seen a wave of openly queer characters and storylines, that challenged the traditional limitations of representation and paved the way for more genuine portrayals of LGBTQ+ experiences. From the poignant themes in "True Blood" to the empowering narratives of "What We Do in the Shadows," these new voices are reshaping the genre, offering a variety of identities and experiences for audiences to explore. While there are opponents to these modern explorations into gender and sexuality within media, letting these media companies know that there is an audience for it is a major way we will see more of these characters and story lines enter the mainstream.

The history of queer allegory and queer coding in vampire media is a testament to the long-lasting power of storytelling as a means of both reflection and revolution. Through the timeless appeal of vampires, creators have confronted societal taboos, challenged preconceived notions, and illustrated the beauty of diversity. As we continue to unravel the mysteries of the night, let us remember that within the darkness lies the promise of acceptance, transformation, and the eternal quest for truth.

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