

Contemporary Paranormal Romance: Theories and Development of the Genre's Feminism (Or Lack Thereof)

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Project Goals

Paranormal romance is a contentious subgenre that some critics have castigated as being anti-feminist. Linda J. Lee writes that this subgenre features “male protagonists [who often] come from a cultural background in which men are dominant over women” (61), and Sandra Booth argues that paranormal romances featuring a monstrous hero and angelic heroine harken back to highly patriarchal forms of gender roles, including consensual sex that reads like violent rape (96-99). However, as the genre proliferated beyond its initial surge in popularity in the 1990s, it—like romance novels generally—matured beyond its beginnings and manifested more complex ideologies. As Lee Tobin-McClain writes, the concept of “collective authorship” of romance causes it to be even more influenced by audience expectations than other literary genres (296), resulting in the need for heightened levels of feminist relationships in popular titles. In this essay, I take Tobin-McClain’s thesis as a starting point and position paranormal romance as a twin heredity form sharing more features of horror than may initially be apparent. I also explore the literary figure of the vampire and then seek to determine—through case study analysis—whether vampire-centric paranormal romance novels have developed more of a feminist sensibility since the early 2000s.

My texts under consideration consist of five contemporary paranormal romance novels in the vampire subgenre, specifically *Dead Until Dark* (Charlaine Harris, 2001), *A Quick Bite* (Lynsay Sands, 2005), *Immortal Faith* (Shelley Adina, 2013), *The Art of Loving a Vampire* (Jaye Wells, 2013), and *Bite Mark* (Lily Harlem, 2016). Each of these books represents an even more specific subgenre within vampire paranormal romance (urban fantasy, family saga, YA/Mennonite romance, mystery, and ménage, respectively), and each was first published within the past two decades. By taking into account the scholarly genealogy of paranormal romance prior to the publication of the works I’m examining, I will be seeking to assess whether

the novels written since that point continues to reflect those themes or if, in fact, several popular exemplars of the genre have grown to exhibit a more overtly feminist sensibility.

Background and Previous Scholarship

In her article “Paranormal Romance: Secrets of the Female Fantastic,” romance scholar and author Lee Tobin-McClain seeks to determine whether or not paranormal romances have progressed into feminist territory in the decades following the first few cursory studies of them. This piece, published in 2000, does not ultimately come to a conclusion, except to posit that while some works released since Sandra Marie Booth’s 1997 article on the subject do demonstrate some progress in this area—mostly by daring to depict male heroes with a greater array of domestic inclinations and female heroines with agency and a sense of adventure—there still are enough pieces exhibiting “bodice ripper” tropes of hypermasculinity, violent love scenes, and hegemonic gender roles that the appeal of such material (especially for feminist readers) is likely quite complex. Tobin-McClain does suggest that some storyline elements of paranormal subgenres might allow readers in abusive relationships to seek a comforting resolution, wherein an aggressive man is tamed through love (which is line with Tania Modleski’s ideas), but she also demonstrates that fantasy is a perfect space for exploring gender reversals, as the expectations of real-life patriarchy are not required to be present in the genre.

Consent—of great concern in feminist readings of romantic texts and of particular attention in the post-#metoo era—is difficult to parse for relationships with a power differential, even when there is no clear indication of force or even coercion. Relationships in which one party exerts significant influence over the other, be it in the workplace, a mentorship, or even with a wide age gap are often scrutinized for signs that the weaker party is being manipulated. Such relationships are often prohibited in work or school environments for these very reasons. In fictional relationships involving a centuries-old male vampire with obvious magical or physical powers far outstripping the abilities of the average living human female of a normal lifespan, that power differential is even more dramatic. Added to this, one folkloric trope of vampiric abilities often involves the ability to hold humans in a hypnotic thrall, which brings up even more

consent-based implications. In more contemporary novels, however, the thrall is frequently absent or the vampire is actually female, rather than male. In my data set, this use of the “thrall” is not present between the vampire and their human partner¹, but one notable exception to this is *Immortal Faith* (discussed in more detail later). Thus, it is quite telling that the vampire lover in that text is ultimately killed, not retained as a viable relationship partner by the female human. Part of the heroine’s objection to the vampire, indeed, is not only his murderous nature but also his ability to manipulate her mentally and emotionally.

Kristina Deffenbacher argues that many paranormal romance novels actually contain an overtly feminist message about avenging rape. Even within the arguably problematic *Twilight* saga is a subplot about a female vampire taking revenge on the man who raped her while she was still human (923-4), and several other paranormal titles include similar storylines of empowerment by women, either human, vampire, or other fantasy figures.

The Intersection of Paranormal Romance and Horror

Rape-revenge narratives, such as what Deffenbacher discusses, are more commonly seen in low-budget horror films of the 1970s and 1980s, and this association is important. Romance and horror seem antithetical, but books going back even further into the nineteenth century than the obvious example of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) blurred this line regularly. The common threads linking romance and horror are not merely their critically denigrated status among not just literature but even mass-marketed popular fiction. Even with this denigration, however, both genres are immensely popular. Furthermore, both genres are also joined by their focus on the physical body and its journey in relation to the psychological. In horror fiction, the body is assaulted, mistreated, subjected to rape, murder, or at the very least visceral terror. In romance fiction, the body may undergo some of the above but with the ultimate goal of passion and positive, loving treatment. In both genres, the body is transformed for better or worse, and characters’ senses are described in more heightened specificity than in any other genre.

¹ The vampires in several of the works being explored have the ability to use the power of the thrall (including *Dead Until Dawn* and *A Quick Bite*), but their use of it on their partners is either wholly absent from the text or used in situations unrelated to sexual activity or the creation or maintenance of a love bond.

Additionally, “paranormal” is largely a fuzzy term in romance which can describe anything unreal, and while this can encompass science fiction romance or romance with fairy tale settings, the most popular variations include monster tropes more frequently found in horror genres. By blending the horrific and romantic, the body is even more centrally located in the text, leading to the potential for more intense sensory details not just of fear but of love, both of which can be thrilling to a reader.

A greater emphasis on the body in literature is a way of reclaiming the assumption that the body is feminine and denigrated and that the mind is masculine and venerated. Whether one is writing in the genre of horror or romance, the acknowledgment that the body is a reasonable subject area for writers and readers is to commit as much a feminist act as writing more cerebrally focused literary fiction. Both approaches dismantle the patriarchal assumption that female-created art is of lesser quality than male-created art or that art has a masculine or feminine dimension at all. As Elizabeth Primamore and Dolores DeLuise write, Sigmund Freud’s psychosexual theory “foregrounded the significance of the body in human lives” (46), but that the body has historically not been granted privilege:

Western philosophical tradition has constructed a mind-body dichotomy that privileges the rational, objective, intellectual “male” mind over the chaotic, subjective, emotional “female” body. Through the gendered body, masculinity is associated with the public realm of work, which means power and knowledge, while femininity is relegated to the private realm of domesticity, frivolousness, weakness, and feelings. (46)

Primamore and DeLuise continue that women’s bodies have been seen and “treated as a site of entrapment” (46), but it is possible to reclaim this. If instead, we consider “the female body as a desiring subject rather than a vessel for reproduction,” then we are making the conscious decision to “challenge the margins to which women have been assigned” (46). In this way, romance writing itself is a feminist act, but so is the reclamation of other forms of writing about the body, and a combination of the multiple such genres further positions women’s bodies as

valid subjects for literary examination.

The Specter of the Vampire

Much of the work in the arena of feminist concerns in vampire romances post-2000 has been on the problematic nature of *Twilight*. However, one interesting element—aside from the aforementioned rape-revenge subplot—is that the saga itself has generated fandom discourse and transformative works on abstinence and feminism, many of which are critiques and reworkings of the books to align better with a feminist ideology (Day 30). I would argue that *Twilight* might have also encouraged authors of original fiction to wrest the vampire subgenre away from its problematic nature.

In many examples of paranormal romances between a male vampire and human female, the male vampire eventually turns his human lover into a vampire, too, as in the *Twilight* series, but in my case studies only one novel—*A Quick Bite*—includes a human turning. In that instance, it involves a human male turned by his female lover, therefore still exhibiting an arguably feminist take on the trope. By inverting the human-vampire relationship, one might say that we can perceive a female character as powerful and magical, which are traits usually reserved for male characters.

Here, I could argue that even having a female vampire at all is a feminist subversion granting women magical and sexual powers not typically afforded them in either fiction or reality. However, female vampires in literature are not a new phenomenon, even if their purpose and interpretation have changed. The historical uses of female vampires in literature have usually emphasized their deviant sexuality used as a weapon against virtuous human men, which is absent from *A Quick Bite*, too.

Before returning to female vampires' use, it may be of use to unpack the appeal of the literary vampire, regardless of gender or genre. Lisa Nystrom's work on *Dracula* may be of particular relevance here. Though Bram Stoker's classic novel is generally seen as a work of horror, there are elements of melodrama and romance in the work, too, and its titular figure is a useful point of entry into this conversation. Most vampire works derive inspiration from Stoker's

work, with many hewing extremely close to it such that the words “vampire” and “Dracula” are fairly inextricably linked. And yet the fear surrounding Dracula himself is not solely to do with his drinking of human blood, Nystrom argues, but because his sexuality and gender performance is ambiguous, and yet he has an “ability to demonstrate and evoke ‘the existence of female passion’ within the innocent female leads” (65). She goes on to demonstrate his effect on the human female populace he stalks:

He both embodies, and is the cause of, a sexual deviance that cannot be tolerated within Victorian society, thus making him dangerous. Dracula is, indeed, a ‘seducer *par excellence*’; he possesses the ability to bring out in women a personality that is both self-assured and highly sexual. (65)

Therefore, it is not that Dracula is a monster but rather that he somehow elicits deviation from patriarchal society—that is, chastity, politeness, modesty, and conformity—in women. That the sexual creature turning women into liberated beings is himself quasi-feminized further threatens patriarchy (Nystrom 65).

The image of the vampire across literary genres is perhaps more ambiguous and sexual a monster than other paranormal figures. Indeed the sexuality demonstrated by vampires is distinctly non-heteronormative in both sexual orientation and gender performance. Dracula keeps a harem-like group of “brides” at his disposal, but also expressing rage when, after “toying with [Jonathan] Harker in a manner that is overtly sexual,” he feels they have spoiled the man, whom he seems to have claimed for himself, implying that Dracula himself is sexually invested in Harker (Nystrom 64). To Nystrom, not only is Dracula himself arguably an androgynous, bisexual figure—a performance of masculinity that would be seen as highly threatening to hegemonic heterosexuality (especially during the Victorian period), but also the presentation of female vampires is somewhat analogous to first-wave feminism.

Nystrom notes that “the fear of the castrating female may be timeless” but that it also manifests differently based on, essentially, different waves of feminism (66). For *Dracula*, the novel is an allegory of the New Woman and ambivalent reactions thereof (Nystrom 66-7). This is

exemplified in Mina but even more so in Lucy:

From the beginning of the story, Lucy shows signs of dissatisfaction with her lot in life, and a tendency to emulate the behavior of the 'New Woman.' She is active and charming, and she dislikes the notion of being bound to a single man. As her frustrations increase, so too does her state of vampirism, and it is only during sleep, when her unconscious desires take hold, that she is able to vent these frustrations. (70)

Nystrom describes how Lucy is meek during the day, but at night she becomes restless, impatient, and seeks to exit the home; her nocturnal personality (and vampirism) "ultimately leads her to Dracula and to emancipation from her society's restraints" (Nystrom 70).

In summing up Nystrom's claims, therefore, it would be fair to say that both male and female vampires exhibit gender and sexuality performances that go counter to mainstream expectations that tend to reinforce the patriarchy. Thus, the use of the figure of any gender could be argued to be an act of feminist or queer liberation of the romance genre, casting relationships in ways that go completely counter to heteronormativity.

Case Studies

To turn to the specific books under examination, I begin with works published immediately after Tobin-McClain's article. *Dead Until Dark* (Charlaine Harris, 2001), is the first novel in the Southern Vampire series, also known by its protagonist, Sookie Stackhouse. By way of the HBO adaptation of the series, the books are also sometimes referred to as *True Blood*. In the first book, Louisiana waitress Sookie Stackhouse gets involved in investigating a series of murders, thanks to her ability to read people's minds. She also falls in love with vampire Bill Compton, and though their romance is arguably an unhealthy one—due to his dishonesty about his presence in her town—their relationship is not based on violence between each other, and their sex life is not portrayed as abusive. Bill's failings as a love interest are based on political machinations and frailties of personality that are not specific to vampires, and the dangerous and life-threatening situations Sookie encounters often have more to do with her investigation and

her own paranormal abilities than a threat Bill poses against her. In Harris' world, vampirism is an allegory for civil rights more so than an allegory for addiction and disease, as it was often portrayed in literature and media of the 1980s. The author emphasizes the similarities vampires share with humans, in order to draw a connection between their pursuit of legal protection in a world predisposed to loathe them, much the same way people have historically fought for civil rights based on gender, race, and sexual orientation. In this way, even though Sookie and Bill's romance is ill-fated as the series progresses, we could see their relationship as not only non-exploitative but in fact a brave act on Sookie's part, demonstrating her allyship and willingness to support the rights of the oppressed. Sookie can be argued to be a feminist figure as well in her pursuit of sexual autonomy and matter-of-fact confidence.

A Quick Bite (Lynsay Sands, 2005) is the first in a long series about a dynastic family of vampires in Canada. The first book centers on the love story between Lissianna Argeneau and Gregory Hewitt. The twist here is that it is Lissianna who is the vampire and Greg who is the human. In the course of the book, Lissianna turns Greg into a vampire, a complete gender reversal from the more traditional vampire romance. Furthermore, the love scenes between the pair are not written in such a way as to imply any lack of or dubious consent, and in fact, Lissiana seems troubled by her longing to drink Greg's blood when he is unconscious. Vampirism is treated more like a medical condition than something that makes one monstrous, and the book's plot outside the confines of the love story have more to do with psychology and political intrigue. A further twist on gender norms is that not only does Lissianna turn Greg into a vampire, but she is the one to propose marriage:

He was saying he loved her, and Lissianna drew in a deep breath, but then held it, then let it out slowly and said, "I'm happy with you, too. I love you, Greg, and while my turning you doesn't automatically make you my life mate, I'd like you to be." (381)

Categorized as a YA Mennonite romance, *Immortal Faith* (Shelley Adina, 2013) is almost ultimately more of a coming-of-age story or perhaps a story about the relationship

between a young woman and God. Iowa teen Sophia Brucker is interested in town newcomer Gabriel Langford, and when he is finally baptized into her religious community, the two begin dating and become engaged. However, Gabriel is a vampire who tries to use his curse as a means of enacting his faith, by only feeding on people he sees as evildoers. Instead of accepting his nature when she learns of it, as most paranormal romance heroines do, Sophia works with her non-Mennonite sister's friends to eventually kill Gabriel, and it is of particular interest to note that the moment of Gabriel's death comes in order that Sophia may protect her sister from being killed (284). In this way, the importance of a bond between two sisters is more important than the bond between two lovers, particularly when the male partner is depicted as monstrous and violent.

By novel's end, she is beginning a fledgling romance with one of the non-Mennonite college students, but her greater commitment seems to be to her spirituality, as she feels that overcoming the temptation of Gabriel cements her strength in God. The novel adheres to more tenants of Amish and Mennonite romance than it does paranormal romance, but the courtship and mystery of Sophia and Gabriel's relationship still include facets of the vampire romance novel. By casting the vampire as a full monster, however, we avoid the sense that he is a seductive presence and the strength of the female character—even without her love interest—is emphasized. Thus, even though this book is arguably conservative in its approach to religion and judges the vampire character harshly, it could still be seen as if not overtly feminist then at least respectful of the strength and perseverance of its heroine.

On the other hand, cementing Gabriel as a monster could go against the idea of the vampire as a symbol of non-normative sexuality and gender. *Immortal Faith* is, in many ways, a novel that shares some commonalities with *Twilight* in this regard: it plays with monstrous tropes, it casts male sexual desire as dangerous, and it contains heavy themes of religion and faith. However, unlike human Bella Swan's passivity and suicidal ideation during her brief breakup with the vampire Edward Cullen, Sophia recognizes herself as an autonomous person capable of moving on after she has vanquished Gabriel. Whether or not Gabriel himself is a

problematic figure, we do see evidence of the strength and triumph of a young woman over adversity and masculine control.

The Art of Loving a Vampire (Jaye Wells, 2013) is the first in a series and has both comedic and mystery elements to it. While this book adheres to some tropes common to contemporary romance—both paranormal and otherwise—including mistaken identity and a MacGuffin-esque caper reminiscent of 1960s Audrey Hepburn movies, integrating comedy into a vampire novel is still unusual. The heroine, Sydney, is a fully fleshed out, intelligent museum curator with a strength of identity not seen in teen and new adult vampire romances. She engages in casual sex without assuming or wanting emotional intimacy, necessarily. The multi-century old vampire Logan is also less broody and Byronic than others of his ilk, but unlike many “alpha” romance heroes, he is perhaps more in tune with his emotional side and longs for commitment. The authors’ other work focuses almost exclusively on smart, capable, strong female heroines, and since Wells doesn’t focus solely on writing paranormal romances, the influences of her other work in urban fantasy and horror come through here by way of more complex plot structure and character development. In terms of the book’s feminist sensibilities, it’s more than they are present in subtle ways rather than overt ones, but there are still in evidence. The vampire, Logan, is shown as being concerned with consent, musing after a night of lovemaking that is couched as merely a one-night stand:

[E]ven if he wanted [Sydney] to be his, he knew he had no right to wish it.

Besides, she had never said she was interested in a romance. In fact, she had said the opposite the night he kissed her. (114)

Bite Mark (Lily Harlem, 2016) is a unique piece within this small sample. Instead of being involved with a single romantic partner, Beatrice “Bea” Benton has two lovers—both vampires—and both eventually marry her, forming a polyamorous union. Furthermore, Bea’s job as a butcher’s assistant is hardly a traditional career path for the average young woman. Subplots involve same-sex romances and the political intrigue of the vampire group, as well as detailed medical information on blood typing (a side plot that seems to recognize the romance reader as

capable of being interested in obscure science-related issues). The sex is graphic, as this novel is classified as erotic romance, but while there are elements of consensual violence, the emphasis is on the consent, with both of Bea's lovers asking her throughout the escalation of their sexual play whether she wants to proceed. Like Jaye Wells, Lily Harlem employs a great deal of humor in her work, which leads to it not feeling like a standard paranormal romance, and although one vampire murders a human, he does it to protect Bea, not out of a monstrous inability to control his bloodlust.

Conclusions and Project Limitations

While it is arguable that a creative work can be classified as wholly feminist or not, trends can still be assessed, at least based on the contemporary understanding of feminism and positive portrayals of gender roles and sexuality. A work that would be considered groundbreaking in its feminist depictions during the era of its release may be deemed problematic later, as society adopts different standards and expansions of what it means to creative progressive representation and even what "feminism" is. Through looking at this limited sample, too, it is not fully possible to determine the trends in this narrow subgenre as a whole. However, even within the confines of this study's restrictions, it is possible to theorize that there are some improvements being made that appear to take into account an increase in reader expectation for more overtly feminist themes.

Opportunities for Further Research

To best continue this conversation, I suggest that a larger sample size would be necessary, which could then be coded for its gender depictions. Reader responses from relevant fan communities and reviews could also be collected, cross-referencing content within the novels under examination with reader reaction to their depictions of gender. Another approach that might positively augment this work would then be to look at sales rankings of the books to examine whether those with feminist approaches were more successful.

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