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## Revampings of Dracula in Contemporary Fiction

Margaret L Carter

[Margaret L Carter, author of *The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography* and editor of *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, has recently published *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien* ([www.xlibris.com/DifferentBlood.html](http://www.xlibris.com/DifferentBlood.html)).]

Although Count Dracula is slain in the final pages of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, throughout the subsequent century he has enjoyed innumerable resurrections in film and literature. Many of these incarnations might be unrecognizable to Stoker as the character he created. Fictional treatments of Dracula, especially those that have appeared within the past thirty years, reflect changes in attitudes toward vampires in general. In contrast to the characterization of vampires in Stoker's own fiction and that of his contemporaries, in recent decades various authors have rendered these "monsters" sympathetically.

Earlier nineteenth-century works do contain a few hints of sympathy for their vampire characters. They inspire sympathy or attraction, however, despite their inhuman nature rather than because of it. They still must be destroyed. The eponymous monster in *Varney the Vampyre* (1847) displays remorse for his bloodthirsty past and finally commits suicide by leaping into a volcano. Carmilla, in J Sheridan Le Fanu's novella (1872), presents herself initially as victim rather than predator, and the narrator, Laura, finds her attractive, yet Carmilla's existence nevertheless ends in violent destruction. Nina Auerbach characterizes pre-Stoker vampires as "not demon lovers or snarling aliens ... but singular friends" in a literary period when "it was a privilege to walk with a vampire" (13). This "sinister, superior sharer" enjoys an "intimate intercourse with mortals," even though a "dangerously close" one (13).

Auerbach views Stoker's novel as introducing a new quality of alienation into the portrayal of the undead; his vampires "blend with mortals only at intervals" and display a "soullessness" that "bars them from human space" (105). The text of *Dracula* strongly implies that the soulless, bloodsucking revenant is a different individual from the dead person who was put into the grave. Dr Seward emphatically refuses to identify the night-prowling Lucy with the woman he loved. "Is this really Lucy's body," he asks, "or only a demon in her shape?" and he labels the revenant "the foul Thing which had taken Lucy's shape without her soul" (260). Both Lucy and Dracula himself, after their destruction, take on a peaceful expression that seems to indicate the return of the "true" soul after the expulsion of an invading vampiric demon. Mina anticipates the "joy" Dracula will experience "when he, too, is destroyed in his worsen part that his better part may have spiritual immortality" (367).

Some of the very traits that made vampires monstrous to readers of the 1890s, oddly, account for their appeal to the mindset of the late twentieth century. Many critics have noted the revulsion with which Stoker's male characters regard the blatant sexuality of the vampirized Lucy. This "voluptuous" quality (to use one of Stoker's favorite words), shared by Dracula's brides, does not extend to the Count himself. Instead, he exemplifies blasphemous defiance of religion (having studied, according to Van Helsing, at the Scholomance, the Devil's school) and ruthless exercise of power. Carol Senf points out, in the vampire fiction of the post-1970 period, an "increasing emphasis on the positive aspects of the vampire's eroticism and on his or her right to rebel against the stultifying constraints of society" (163). Combined with the frequent appearance of literary vampires who "are less bloodthirsty than ordinary human beings" (6), this stress on the "positive" dimension of traits considered negative by nineteenth-century authors and readers produces attractive, even admirable bloodsuckers. One of the earliest illustrations of this trend appeared in the television series *Dark Shadows* (1966-71) with Barnabas Collins, who began life (or undeath) as a Gothic villain and grew into a popular and sympathetic character. Portrayal of Dracula as a character in popular fiction has shifted focus along with these changes in writers' and audiences' perception of vampirism.

Bloomian “misreadings” of Stoker’s novel, of course, began in the 1920s with the stage play by Hamilton Deane and John L Balderston, which transformed the Count into a romantic melodrama villain. As David J Skal notes, this drama created an “image of the master vampire in evening dress and opera cloak ... polite enough to be invited into a proper Knightsbridge living room” and “able to interact with the characters, rather than merely hang outside their bedroom windows” (69-70). Yet this Dracula, though more alluring than Stoker’s, cannot be mistaken for anything but the villain, just as in the Bela Lugosi film (1931). True, Lugosi’s Dracula quotes Swinburne’s line about “worse things waiting for man than death,” a remark one would not expect to hear from Stoker’s Count. But despite this touch of pathos and the erotic overtones of the film, he remains unmistakably diabolical, as do vampires in general and Dracula in particular until the early 1970s. (I exclude humorous and parodic treatments, of course.)

Raymond Rudorff’s *The Dracula Archives* (1971), for example, chronologically stands on the cusp dividing the traditional, diabolical undead from the “new” vampire, allowed to be morally neutral or even good. Dracula himself does not appear “onstage” until the very end of the novel. Rudorff’s story, a prelude to Stoker’s, unfolds a long, complex process of preparation for the advent of the vampire lord. Dracula returns to unnatural life by possessing the body of a young man whose mother had succumbed to a vampire embrace and been destroyed, like Lucy, by staking. Like Lucy, Adelaide in *The Dracula Archives* is framed as a victim whose true innocence is restored when her vampiric nature is exorcised by the stake. Rudorff’s novel makes an interesting contrast with a much later prequel to *Dracula*, Jeanne Kalogridis’ “Diaries of the Family Dracul” trilogy, beginning with *Covenant with the Vampire* (1994). Here Dracula himself, unmistakably evil, demands blood sacrifices from his subjects and relatives, yet individual vampires can choose to resist the descent into darkness inherent in the loss of their humanity. The vampire remains the person he or she was before transformation. In Rudorff’s 1971 novel, as in Stoker, rebirth in vampire form simply obliterates the humanity of the transformed victim.

The year before Anne Rice brought the sympathetic vampire to the attention of readers outside the genre, another novel narrated a vampire’s apologia on tape in his own words. The 1970s, according to Auerbach, constitute “a halcyon decade for vampires, one in which they not only flourished, but reinvented themselves” (131). Fred Saberhagen’s *The Dracula Tape* (1975), one instance of such reinvention, portrays Count Dracula as a misunderstood nobleman persecuted by a gang of superstition-addled men under the direction of a bigoted, hardheaded Professor Van Helsing. This favorable treatment of Dracula recurs in several other works of fiction during the 1970s and 1980s, in accordance with that period’s general tendency to characterize fictional monsters as simply different kinds of people. Echoes from the civil rights movement resonate in fantastic fiction, with vampires and other inhuman beings shown as another misjudged minority group. Saberhagen’s book, which became the first in a still-continuing series, foreshadowed and helped to create this trend. The Count Dracula portrayed on screen by Frank Langella in 1979, for instance, resembles Saberhagen’s hero more than he does the Bela Lugosi or Christopher Lee Dracula. Auerbach describes Langella’s Dracula as “sad and wise and far-seeing, erotically easy in his animal self,” clearly superior to the “scurrying little mortals” who harass him (145).

The predominance of the sympathetic vampire, however, has been countered in recent years by a “backlash” toward viewing the vampire as evil monster, a trend Auerbach links to the emergence of AIDS (among other cultural phenomena), as illustrated by the dominance of the disease metaphor in many recent novels. Yet these works do not merely revert to the nineteenth-century view of the vampire as demonic and worthy only of destruction. Following upon decades of highly successful novels and stories foregrounding “good” vampires, these recent backlash works tend to take a more nuanced approach. An outstanding example is *Anno-Dracula* (1992), by Kim Newman.

The typical fictional vampire of the 1970s and beyond is humanized rather than demonic. The product of a secular world-view, he or she no longer necessarily constitutes a threat to the victim’s immortal soul – and may even possess a soul him- or herself. Even if still conceived as a supernatural being returned from the dead, this kind of vampire has free will and may choose to behave ethically. Saberhagen’s *The Dracula Tape* not only endows Dracula with free will but merges Stoker’s character with the historical Vlad Tepes and recreates both in positive rather than negative terms. This Dracula is the hero of the tale instead of the villain, not only a nobleman but a gentleman, telling his side of the story

in an urbane, sardonic tone. The first-person narrative incorporates all the “facts” established in Stoker’s epistolary novel but reinterprets them from Dracula’s point of view. His goal is not to invade and conquer England but “to be fully and unquestioningly accepted in the normal world as human” (22). Lucy and Mina freely give him their blood in highly erotic encounters. He backs away from a brandished eucharistic wafer, not because he fears holy objects, but because he prefers not to desecrate them with his enemies’ gore. Van Helsing, not the vampire, commits sacrilege by misusing sacred symbols. Lucy dies from transfusions of incompatible blood, not from Dracula’s feeding, and he doses her with his transforming blood in an attempt to save her life. She preys upon children, Dracula theorizes, because her traumatic death has damaged her mind. The scar on Mina’s forehead results from the hypnotic force of Van Helsing’s personality acting upon her own guilt, not from God’s curse. The staking of an undead revenant does not liberate a soul from Satan but constitutes simple murder. Vampirism, in short, becomes a morally neutral transformation, leaving the subject’s free will intact. Dracula maintains, “It is the *forcing* of death, or of a change in life, that’s criminal, whether the force be applied by vampire fang, or wooden stake, or means more subtle used against a vulnerable mind or heart” (103) – an obvious allusion to human beings’ frequently inhumane treatment of their fellow men and women. Since, like many recent literary vampires, Saberhagen’s Vlad Dracula is less violent and cruel than his mortal adversaries, he has, as Joe Sanders puts it, “something to teach breathing humans about choosing honor and compassion as they live their uncertain lives in a chaotic world” (118).

*The Dracula Tape* anticipates not only Rice’s subjective, internalized presentation of the vampire as protagonist but also the heroic, attractive Count Saint-Germain of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. This character, who first appears in *Hotel Transylvania* (1978), may be described as a mirror image of Dracula. Saint-Germain, like Stoker’s villain, is a Transylvanian Count who sleeps on his native earth, casts no reflection, and transforms his donors by sharing his own blood with them. But Yarbro’s vampire, unlike Stoker’s, is generous, self-sacrificing, and highly ethical. Religious symbols have no negative effect on him; in fact, a scene in *Hotel Transylvania*, in a deliberately ironic reversal of roles, shows him warding off a gang of Satanists with a holy object. Yarbro, by the way, has also created her own version of Dracula, in her recent trilogy dealing with the vampire’s three “brides.” Her Dracula, based directly on Stoker’s, belongs to the more recent phase of fictional vampirism. Though ruthless and evil, he appears so from free choice rather than diabolical compulsion, and the women he transforms make their own ethical choices after initiation into the new existence of undeath.

In the 1990s readers have seen a reversion to the unequivocally “evil” vampire (though the more benign type has not, of course, vanished). This “backlash” predator, however, freely chooses to defy the laws of God and society rather than acting under compulsion from the indwelling of a diabolical force. *Dracula Unbound* (1991), by Brian Aldiss, most nearly approaches framing the vampire as inherently evil. Aldiss’ monsters, reptilian parasites operating on instinct rather than intelligence, cannot make moral choices. They feed on human victims from the same innate drive that any other subhuman predator does. Dracula himself appears “horned and gigantic, more devil than man” (159), but the “devilish” quality is metaphorical, not literal. Bram Stoker, as a character in this metafictional novel, scorning the suggestion that vampires might be “one more oppressed minority” (as many post-1970 works characterize them), classifies them as “simply ... a bad lot – a disease, in short” (181). This book contains no “good” vampires. In keeping with the preoccupations of the late twentieth century, however, the “evil” of vampirism arises from biological rather than supernatural roots.

Another reinterpretation of vampirism as disease instead of demonic possession appears in Dan Simmons’ *Children of the Night* (1992). Set partly in Romania after the fall of Communism, Simmons’ novel propounds its theory of vampirism against the background of AIDS-infected children left to the overstressed mercy of the state. In this case, the genetic disorder that causes vampirism carries positive as well as negative qualities. If properly harnessed, this mutation has the potential to confer benefits on humanity, including a treatment for AIDS. The “vampire” most visible to the reader is not only innocent but helpless – a baby boy, seen through the viewpoint of his foster mother. As for Dracula, he works behind the scenes, a ruthless tyrant, killer, and capitalist, motivated not by the Devil but by pragmatic self-interest.

Kim Newman's alternate history, begun in *Anno-Dracula*, depicts Europe and England in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth as dominated by vampires. Newman rewrites the conclusion of Stoker's narrative to reveal that Dracula survived his conflict with Van Helsing's band and married the widowed Queen Victoria. Now that Dracula (identified with Vlad Tepes) has become Prince Consort of Great Britain, the vampire minority holds sway over the "warm" majority. Ordinary human citizens retain their civil rights, but vampires have a near-monopoly on political power and social chic. As Elizabeth Hardaway notes, Stoker's Dracula, "a grotesquely romantic outsider," becomes in Newman's novel "a power-mad politician and despot who has made England safe for vampires" (179). Dracula himself, not seen in person until the end of the novel, is a loathsome monster, an undead bloodsucker of the most gruesome type, enthroned naked except for an "ermine-collared black velvet cloak, ragged at the edges" and "his body thickly coated with matted hair, blood clotting on his chest and limbs" (342). Sadistically cruel to Queen Victoria, whom he keeps chained at his side, he retains negative traits that originated in his human lifetime; "barely a generation away from his mountain bully-boy ancestors," he displays "the philistine avarice of a true barbarian" (346). Although supernatural as well as depraved, he is not, however, literally diabolical. Hardaway remarks upon Newman's "secularization of Dracula and, even more importantly, of vampires in general," observing that, "The Dracula that haunts *Anno Dracula* ... is grotesque, violent, and corrupt, but ultimately secular," and that vampiric violence "differs only in degree, not kind, from the violence and cruelty found in the human heart" (185).

In Newman's fiction vampirism as such is not inherently evil. While some of the undead spring from "debased bloodlines," such as the "polluted" bloodline of Vlad Tepes, others escape this curse (166). One of the principal villains, Jack the Ripper, turns out to be the completely human Dr John Seward, driven mad by the death of Lucy. And we find upright, ethical characters among the vampire population. Genevieve Dieudonne, for example, devotes her time to charitable works. She even aids a human secret agent, Charles Beauregard, in his attempt to assassinate the Prince Consort. Genevieve, as Auerbach puts it, "is a harmonizing alternative to Dracula's sick spawn" (178). Hardaway points out that the novel emphasizes the parallels between vampires and ordinary people more than their differences, conveying as its subtext "a philosophy that values 'humanity' (warm and undead alike) over such external constructs as government or other power-based entities" (181).

Fictional reinterpretations of Dracula as a character have thus evolved over the past century from Stoker's original characterization of the Count as satanic through various stages corresponding to the overall evolution of the literary vampire. When the typical vampire of the popular imagination became humanized in the 1970s, Fred Saberhagen created a Dracula who epitomized this trend and helped to catalyze its growth. Later, when the vampire as ruthless predator ascended to renewed popularity (though the sympathetic vampire has not, of course, vanished), Draculas of this type proliferated, as illustrated by the works of Jeanne Kalogridis, Dan Simmons, and Kim Newman. Since these novelists wrote after the significant shift in the fictional vampire from undead corpse animated by the Devil to a humanized being with free will and moral responsibility, however, they did not create vampires who were simply evil. In the fiction of these more recent writers, a more nuanced approach allows the possibility of "good" vampires, even though the archetypal vampire, Dracula, is depicted as evil.

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