A Short Literary History of Vampires

You've heard of *Twilight*. You may have read *Twilight*. Try as you might, you can't escape *Twilight* (or 'True Blood', or Anne Rice, or wonderful B-horror vampire movies that are on ITV at three in the morning). These days, vampires are everywhere. So where did they come from?

Le Vampire by Phillip Burne Jones[Public Domain]via Wikimedia CommonsIn England, the vampire craze began in 1819, the Year Without a Summer [1]. Lord Byron, John Polidori, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Wollstonescraft Shelley (check out the Bodleian Library's exhibition on the Shelleys here [2]), and Claire Clairmont were staying at Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva. Trapped indoors due to bad weather for three days, they took turns telling, then writing, ghost stories. Mary Shelley's would become *Frankenstein*. John Polidori, physician to Byron (inspired by his pale, languid, over-sexed patient) wrote *The Vampyre: A Tale* [3].

A craze (or bloodlust?) was born. Lord Ruthven was a vampire modelled after the Byronic hero, sophisticated, tortured, and highly seductive. Partly because of a misattribution to Byron, the story was published in *New Monthly Magazine*, and became an instant hit. *The Vampyre* was made into a play and an opera.

Emily Brontë would reference the new fad for vampires in her 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* [4], when the housekeeper suspects Heathcliff of being a vampire. In 1872, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu wrote *Carmilla* [5], a novella which introduced the concept of lesbian vampires, which Hollywood would later adore. And in 1897, English literary vampires reached thrilling new heights with the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* [6], which introduced such conventions as garlic, stakes, vampire brides, Vlad the Impaler, and the vampire hunter Dr. Abraham Van Helsing (not to mention providing some pretty intriguing commentary on the role of women and sexual repression in Victorian society). Today, the character of Count Dracula appears in over 272 films.

Why did the vampire capture the English (and now, global) imagination in the way that it did? We are of course assuming an explanation other than vampires using their dark powers to seduce us all.

Literary vampires grapple with basic fears: fears of what's foreign, fear of the dark, and the fear of the enemy that can pass among us, unrecognised. They also capitalise on the sort of sensationalised, tantalising danger that was popularised by news reports about the Jack the Ripper murders. Vampires are sexual, mysterious, and have a long history and extensive lore. Most of all, they make a great bad guy.

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Year_Without_a_Summer

[2] http://shelleysghost.bodleian.ox.ac.uk

[3] http://writersinspire.org/content/vampyre

[4] http://writersinspire.org/content/wuthering-heights-0

[5] http://writersinspire.org/content/carmilla

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