

2013

Re-masculating the Vampire: Conceptions of Sexuality and the Undead from Rossetti's Proserpine to Meyer's Cullen

Emily Schuck

Claremont Graduate University, Emily.Schuck@cgu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/lux>

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schuck, Emily (2013) "Re-masculating the Vampire: Conceptions of Sexuality and the Undead from Rossetti's Proserpine to Meyer's Cullen," *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 26.
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/lux/vol2/iss1/26>

Re-masculating the Vampire: Conceptions of Sexuality and the Undead from Rossetti's Proserpine to Meyer's Cullen

Emily Schuck
 Claremont Graduate University
 School of Arts and Humanities

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between sexuality and the undead from Victorian England to present day vampire narratives. Specifically, I examine the shift in the vampire narrative from the frightening Dracula to the extremely sexualized nature of vampires in the early twenty-first century. My results are concerned with the nature and exchange of fluids between vampire bodies and their victims (or lovers) and the power associated with that exchange. My conclusion implies that re-masculating the vampire is a return to a patriarchal dominant discourse promulgates the heteronormative status quo, unlike their early predecessors, which tend to undermine heteronormative sexuality.

“Those Victorians always coupled sex with death,” writes Margaret Atwood in a recent short story published in *The New Yorker*. This particular comment comes at the conclusion of the story, after an elderly woman exacts fatal revenge on her childhood rapist, whom she encounters on a booze cruise for seniors. As Atwood notes, the Victorians *were* always coupling sex and death, and they had good reason: sex was scary. Without modern medicine, childbirth was risky and infant mortality was high. Further, diseases like syphilis and other venereal diseases posed an additional threat that could be fatal. The Victorian vampire is a spot-on literary manifestation of these fears. Penetration by the vampire could leave the victim dead. But the Victorian vampire is not solely a manifestation of sex and death. By disrupting the normative sexual discourse, it also reveals a fear of a lack of heteronormative sexuality. Examining the vampiric sexual bodies in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, J. Sheridan La Fanu’s “Carmilla,” and three modern interpretations of the vampire: Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*, the television show *True Blood*, and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga*, reveals a shift in the nature of the vampire narrative.

The Victorians are not the only ones who are always coupling sex with death. The recent *Twilight* phenomena, shows (and books) like *True Blood*, and even modern horror movies like *Friday the 13th* (in which a young woman is staked through the breasts post-coitus by a set of deer antlers) seem to demonstrate that over 100 years later we are still coupling sex and death. One of the oldest couplings of sex and death, and one of literature’s first undead, is Persephone. Ovid appropriately titles it “The Rape of Proserpine.” Hades “swept her away, so impatient in passion. In panic, Proserpina desperately cried for her mother and friends [...] her dress had been torn at the top” (Ovid 5.395-400). Hades then takes her to the underworld where she eats the six pomegranate seeds that destine her to return every year to the underworld. This functional narrative explains that Ceres/Demeter (her mother) is so upset by the yearly loss of her daughter

that as she mourns, winter takes over the earth. The Victorian poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti used this myth for his subject in his poem and painting, namesakes of the mythical goddess. The poem portrays Proserpine as the modern woman would hope she would be: “unhappy” that she has been kidnapped and held captive in the underworld. However, not all adaptations of Proserpine are unhappy. A recent collection of short stories ironically titled, *And Yet They Were Happy* by Helen Phillips, introduces a different perspective on Proserpine, which is so interesting that I will quote it in full:

We the daughters of the twenty first century are not mystified by Persephone’s behavior. In school, we learn that Persephone is frolicking in a field when Hades kidnaps her and take her underground. Persephone’s mother Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, freaks out. Every plant in the world dies. Eventually Persephone is found [...] she looks anorexic. Hades says that she can leave if she must but first why doesn’t she eat this. It’s not till she emerges into the weird sunlight—it’s not till she’s in her mother’s kitchen sipping pumpkin soup—it’s not till Demeter signs with relief to know her daughter didn’t eat anything down there—that Persephone makes her confession about the six pomegranate seeds. [...] What Persephone will never mention is the rich unending night, the earthy smell of scotch on his breath, the way he mocked the universe and everyone in it but was so tender with the dead, with her, with beasts and ghosts. How low his voice got when he told her attempts would be made to separate them. Now, we the daughters of the twenty-first century are going to marry men our mothers don’t quite love. These men seem dark to them, dangerous, lacking in good posture. We sit at our mothers’ tables, trying to explain why we have chosen to settle in distant, inhospitable cities [...] we suggest to our mothers that they read a certain Greek myth; they raise their eyebrows at us as they always do now-a-days; the grass begins to shrivel in the ground, and in the orchard the apples sicken on the branch (128-9).

If it is true—that the daughters of the twenty-first century are akin to the Proserpine who is not unhappy, and truly satisfied with our lovers of the underworld—then the *Twilight* phenomena is no longer quite so baffling. What is interesting, however, is the evolution of Ovid’s Proserpine to Phillips’s. When did the dead become less scary, and deeply loveable? For that matter, when and how did their animated counterpart of the undead evolve from the horrific monster of Count Dracula into the sparkly Edward Cullen? I posit that one answer is in the conceptions of sexuality and its manifestations in the undead vampire—in particular, a survey of gendered vampire bodies and their relationship to power. With an examination of Victorian and modern vampire fiction and the particulars of their sexuality it is possible to trace the transformation from monster to monsieur.

Sigmund Freud, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* writes: “If the store of semen is exhausted, not only is it impossible to carry out the sexual act, but the susceptibility of the erotogenic zones to stimulus ceases, and their appropriate excitation no longer gives rise to any pleasure” (79). In other words, Freud argues that if semen is not present, pleasurable sex is not possible. Victorian vampires ostensibly fall into this category—beyond the fact that they are

dead and appropriately can no longer create (natural) life—the prime fluid of interest to the vampire is blood, not semen. Lloyd Worley writes that “a male that lacks semen—as would be expected in demons and vampires—would be impotent and would find no pleasure in normal sexuality” and furthers his argument to say that “the vampire figure is constitutionally female” (28-9), and that “vampires are impotent [...] as females, they are not capable of male sexual performance” (30). They are capable of creating children in a complicated ritual that usually involves the victim receiving the blood of the vampire, what Worley explains as “not through genital sexuality, but through vampiric activity involved in teeth, lips and tongue” (29). This vision of “teeth, lips and tongue” recalls the concept of the *vagina dentata*, or the vagina with teeth, further emasculating the impotent vampire with a dangerous feminine receptacle through which to receive fluid.

Regardless, the masculine sexual overtones in *Dracula* are anything but surreptitious. One reading of the novel suggests that if we substitute blood for semen and kisses for intercourse, that “we are left with a novel as sexually explicit as any of the time” (Day, 215). Nursel Icoz argues that furthermore, “In the battle to save Lucy from the clutches of Dracula, blood becomes a *direct analogy* for semen. The vampire craves blood for its life giving properties; semen too is a fluid without which procreation cannot occur” (216, emphasis added). While Lucy is penetrated by not only Dracula, but also with the blood of three other men, her husband Arthur one-ups them all. He achieves the ultimate penetration when, after her undead rebirth into “a nightmare [...] a devilish mockery”, he stakes her and thus relieves her of her undead nature (190). Afterwards, Arthur “looked too [at the staked body], and then a glad strange light broke over his face and dispelled altogether the gloom of horror that lay upon it” (192). Arthur could be smiling because his beloved will now be resting with the angels as Dr. Van Helsing claims, instead of haunting the earth with her undead brethren. But his reaction is suspiciously happy considering the horror of staking one’s wife (or anybody for that matter), resembling more closely the “after-sex glow” that would result from human intercourse. This final penetration of Lucy (and also the staking of the three vampire sister/wives by Dr. Van Helsing) forces the reader to question which characters are most invasive to the feminine body. It also demonstrates the restoration of the natural order: it is Lucy’s husband, Arthur, who should be penetrating her, thus resituating the human, masculine body as in control of the feminine, undead one.

While the penetrations in *Dracula* are not genital, they are frequent in the narrative and their implications are explicit. However, a literal look at the way that the Victorian vampire penetrated its victims, a gender reversal becomes apparent. The vampiric dental penetration of sucking blood from the neck or breast of their victims is more like the traditional female role in sex. While the tooth of the vampire serves as a phallic representation of penetration, the blood is received by the penetrator, not the penetrated. As the vampire sucks the blood of their (usually female) victim, a role reversal occurs, in which the blood-giver (penetrated) is the source of the fluid which creates and sustains life for the male vampire, effectively—in Freudian terms anyway—emasculating the vampire.

Like happy Proserpine, it seems that the perfect Victorian woman is a dead one. Elisabeth Bronfen does an extensive study on the female dead body noting “that woman needs to kill herself into a beautiful idea to have power over her husband” (414). The dead woman in reality is inanimate, and exactly that: an idea. The undead female vampire—a manifestation of the fear of the woman with sexual prowess who is either not dead or undead—“embod[ies] an aggressive sexuality that can dissolve sexual gender distinctions” (Day, 214). La Fanu’s

“Carmilla,” a predecessor to *Dracula*, is exactly this, and also destabilizes the heteronormative patriarchal sexual norm. Carmilla is a powerful female vampire attracted to women. The discourse is further disturbed by the female/female attraction, and the vampiric party’s power to penetrate. Like *Dracula*, Carmilla penetrates her victims, but the site of penetration is unclear. The protagonist, Laura, reports twice to the reader “a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep” (4), and later “a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast” (39). But later, she recounts the incident to her physician, who is monitoring her declining health, that the needles sensation occurred “very little before my throat” (51). Beyond demonstrating the power of Carmilla to penetrate a feminine symbol, the breast, Laura’s reports to her male allies are inconsistent, illustrating the instability of the narrative, and the inability of men to control Carmilla’s sexual power. Furthermore, Laura’s attraction to Carmilla demonstrates a kind of attraction/repulsion narrative that echoes Freudian masochism, which he lists as one of the “Sexual Aberrations.” He writes: “[Sexual] satisfaction is conditional upon suffering physical or mental pain” (24). Similarly, Laura describes her feelings for Carmilla, as “a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence” (23). Like Freud’s theory, Carmilla manifests a sexual aberration: the sexually aggressive woman. At the end of the narrative, fittingly, Carmilla is staked in the chest by the physician: “the body...was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire...the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck...that territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire” (79). Laura’s father restores heteronormative roles, by penetrating the female vampire.

Like the penetrator in *Dracula*, Carmilla also receives her live-giving fluid from women, creating a feminine character that both penetrates and is penetrated by blood—much like Lucy before she is staked, who sucks blood from small children. But unlike Lucy, Carmilla courts, seduces, and victimizes full-grown women, a mark of her strength that perhaps Lucy did not have. Again, the sexual implications in “Carmilla” are explicit; the novella is often simply described as “a lesbian vampire tale.” No genital penetration takes place, but this is substituted with ambiguous breast and neck punctures, and the receiving of a life-giving fluid. Part of the vampire’s horror is that they represent untamed and uncontrolled sexuality. We, the daughters of the twenty-first century, understand our sexuality at least slightly more than the Victorians did. Don’t we?

Until recently the vampire was unable to penetrate genitally. While *Dracula* penetrates both Lucy and Mina, he does not violate them genitally, unlike the sexual narratives that eroticize biting in today’s vampire fiction. Considering this, Worley is apt in hypothesizing that all literary vampires are impotent, and gain sexual pleasure and nourishment through the sucking of blood. Even Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* illustrate vampires unable to have genital sex—but they can have a vampiric form of sex, which involves the exchange of blood. In *The Queen of the Damned*, the vampire Lestat describes his encounter with the vampire queen: “The lust I felt was unsupportable...the hot fountain was roaring into me...my body was throbbing again with the pleasure; no earth; no gravity” (Rice 251). This demonstrates an androgynous figure: a vampire who is both penetrated and penetrates and both receives and deposits fluid.

Unlike the vampires of Anne Rice, the vampires of *True Blood*, in both their textual and on-screen adaptations, are able and active sexual beings. Vampires who can have sex eliminate the fear of impotency and reestablish order in the disruption of the normative sexual act. They can both penetrate and deliver fluid (semen), as well as receive the fluid of the victim/lover (blood), eliminating the fear of emasculation and remasculating the vampire. An article in

Rolling Stone Magazine in late 2010 titled “The Joy of Vampire Sex” discusses the addition of a functional male organ to vampire lore in the popular television show. “‘The idea of celibate vampires is ridiculous,’ *True Blood* creator Alan Ball says. ‘To me, vampires are sex’” (Grigoriadis). The article goes on to discuss that while plenty of supernatural (and homoerotic) sex happens on screen that “None of the sex is quite as good as vampire sex, though, which can happen at the astonishing rhythm of 120 bpm while simultaneously devouring one's neck and making your eyes roll back into your head” (Grigoriadis). The actor who plays Bill Compton, the primary love interest for the mind-reading heroine Sookie Stackhouse, hits this modern adaptation of the blood-sucking fiends' sexuality right on the head. He says:

“If we go from a base level, vampires create a hole in the neck where there wasn't one before. It's a de-virginization—breaking the hymen, creating blood and then drinking the virginal blood. And there's something sharp, the fang, which is probing and penetrating and moving into it. So that's pretty sexy. I think that makes vampires attractive.” He laughs a little. “Plus, Robert Pattinson is just hot, right?” (Grigoriadis).

Some critics view the *Twilight* saga as appallingly antifeminist. One critic notes, “When Bella falls in love, a girl in love is all she is” (Mann, 133). Another writes: “Only in the context of a relationship, Meyer indicates, can self and identity be forged. The self does not exist in isolation, but in attachment” and that in regard to this, “[Meyer] is speaking as much allegorically about motherhood as she is about being a vampire. In fact, the two are so closely interconnected as to be indistinguishable” (Silver, 133). In other words, only when Bella becomes attached to Edward through vampirism and motherhood, is she truly able to find herself. After being reborn as a vampire, Bella expresses that she and Edward were “Finally equal [...] I had found my true place in the world, the place I fit, the place I shined” (Meyer 483, 524). This presents a narrative in which Bella embraces her new identity and sexuality as a vampire. The interesting twist, however, is that instead of being frightened of vampirism, Bella welcomes it. Edward disagrees entirely; he is strongly against “turning” Bella. Meyer's popular narrative sends conflicting messages. On the one hand, Bella only “shines” as mother/vampire, a role she begs to play. But on the other, both parties of the sexual union receive and give fluids, creating an equality that challenges the traditional vampire narrative. It seems, even in the twenty-first century, women still have to be dead to ascertain any power over (or equal to) men. Only the dead vampire woman is capable of accepting the feminine sexuality that the vampire represents.

If “‘Carmilla’” and *Dracula* create horror by “manipulating gender expectations and cultural preconceptions about proper sexual behavior, but in doing [so] open to public discourse acts that previously had been relegated to darkness,” then how do vampires create horror today (Holte 143)? The simple answer is that they do not. The vampire is no longer associated with horror in the same way that it was for the Victorians—but its allure and connection to sexuality remains. William Patrick Day posits that “contemporary stories chart the movement from sexuality to violence as the central theme of the vampire legend, for the control of our predatory instincts, not our sexual ones, has become the problem of humanity in search of itself in the late twentieth century” (7). While sex is much less scary for “the daughters of the twenty-first century” than it was for the Victorians—vampires have not essentially outgrown their connection

to sexuality. Modern vampires are still frequently used to demonstrate some kind of sexuality, and seem to have grown more likable. Certainly, Edward courts Bella in a way that strongly rivals Carmilla's and vampire Bill says Sookie's name with more compassion than we could ever imagine coming from Count Dracula. Today's vampires are much more human than the Victorians'. Though, keeping this in mind we have to wonder: is it the literary vampires that have become more human, or humanity that is becoming more vampiric? Either way, the essential function of the literary vampire has undergone a notable shift. The fear of abnormal sexuality as embodied in the vampire has vanished. The remasculated vampire enforces the cultural vampire of heteronormativity.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. "Stone Mattress" *The New Yorker*. 19 & 26 December 2011: 122-133.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Goodwin, Sara Goodwin and Elisabeth Brofen, Eds. *Death and Representation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Grigoriadis, Vanessa. "The Joy of Vampire Sex" *Rolling Stone*. 28 August 2010: Web. <<http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/the-joy-of-vampire-sex-true-blood-on-rolling-stones-latest-cover-20100817>>
- Holte, James Craig, Ed. *The Fantastic Vampire, Studies in Children of the Night: Selected Essays from the Eighteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*. London: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Icoz, Nursel. "The Un-dead: To be feared and/or pitied" *Vampires: myths and metaphors of enduring evil*. Ed. Peter Day. New York: Rodopi, 2006. 209-226.
- Le Fanu, J. Sheridan. "Carmilla" Ed. Jamieson Ridenhour. Kansas City: Valencourt Books, 2009.
- Meyer, Stephanie. *Breaking Dawn*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008.
- Ovid. *Metamorphosis*. Trans. David Raeburn. London: Penguin, 2004.
- Phillips, Helen. *And Yet They Were Happy*. Teaticket: Leap Frog Press, 2011.
- Rice, Anne. *The Queen of The Damned*. New York: Balentine Books, 1988.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Proserpine" The Victorian Web. 23 May 2008. Web. 12 Jan 2012. <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/dgr/drawings/5.html>>
- Silver, Anna. "Twilight is Not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series." *Studies in the Novel* 42.1-2 (Spring and Summer 2010): 121-138.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. New York: WW Norton & Company, Inc., 1997.
- Waller, Gregory. *The Living and the undead: From Stoker's Dracula to Romero's Dawn of the Dead*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Worley, Lloyd. "Loving Death: the meaning of male sexual impotence in vampire literature." *Journal of the Fantastic in the arts*, 2.1 (March 1989): 29-36.
- Lux: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University*, Volume 2 © (December 2012) Claremont University Consortium.