

**World of Vampires in *Interview with the Vampire*: Lands of Vampire
Infestation in Europe and Americas**

Tennyson Thomas

Research Scholar

Dept of English

Karpagam Academy of Higher Education

tennysonthomas@gmail.com

Dr Selvalakshmi S

Professor and Head

Dept of English

Karpagam Academy of Higher Education

selva.lakshmi85@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the journey of the major vampire characters of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* through specific landscapes, and takes a look at how these lands have attributed to the changes in the characters. It also takes a look at the beliefs related to vampires prevailing in these lands before the publication of the work, and attempts to understand the relation between the history of the human world, vampire beliefs and the later depiction in the first novel of the much appreciated series of vampire books, *The Vampire Chronicles*.

It can be seen that the history of each location where the vampire character is placed has some role to play in the characteristics of the particular person, even though vampires are often considered as one species consisting of dead people rising from the grave. The vampires of Anne Rice are created out of their own particular worlds. Each vampire or group of vampires can be seen as having the elements of their worlds, whether they are living in the

slave plantations of Americas, grand cities of Western Europe or the remote villages of Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Gothic, vampire, horror, undead, graves, immortality

Introduction

Immortality has been part of human beliefs for a long time – “Evidence for a belief in immortality can be found in ancient burial customs which reveal that our ancestors had an expectation of an afterlife and a respect for the memory of the dead” (Roland 21). Even though such beliefs have always existed throughout history, best reflected in the grand tombs of Egypt, the Pyramids, the first recordings of vampire activity came much later. The people of Babylon and Assyria only had these early forms of vampires as demonic beings who were from outside this plane of existence, and not close to the manner in which they are depicted now (Bane 20). In comparison to the ancient civilization of Egypt which was built on the banks of River Nile with different kinds of beliefs about death, the other tales about afterlife before Christ seem to be of less significance.

The main objective of this paper is to explore the lands where the vampires thrived, with reference to Anne Rice’s first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*. The paper will also have a look at the early vampire beliefs and the history of the different lands where these legends came into being, with focus on how they have served as a part of this novel by Anne Rice. The legend of vampires has been associated more with Eastern Europe rather than any other geographical area in the world. It has been specifically focused on the Balkan Peninsula, an area which includes mostly the southern nations of Eastern Europe. It now includes twelve nations, even though only five of them are completely within the peninsula. The peninsula has continued to be different from the rest of the Europe throughout centuries.

Among them, Slavic people were integral part of spreading such beliefs further, and so were the Carpathian Mountains.

Vampires as Part of History and Legends

Most of the peninsula had once come under Ottoman Empire, before separate nations struggled for independence, with Greeks and Serbs leading from the front as a result of the rise of nationalism. Two major figures who came to be realized as vampire-like people lived during this time period. One of them was Vlad, a warlord who stopped the Turkish advance with guerrilla warfare, and impaled his enemies on stakes. Another major figure came into prominence many years later – a Hungarian noblewoman named Elizabeth Bathory, was said to take bath in the blood of young virgin girls who were her servants (Twitchell 16-18). These two people would become prototypes for future development of vampires, especially Vlad, who would become the model for one of the greatest vampire novels ever written. Long before the nineteenth and the twentieth century changed the equation of power in Europe, the Carpathians had also served as sources of vampire myths, as much as the Balkan Mountains which provided the peninsula with the name. Different areas have had different ways of identifying corpses which turned into vampires, for example in Bulgaria: “Signs of a developing vampire are a hole in the tombstone above the grave and severe bloating before burial” (Bunson 35). These beliefs had common patterns as well as differences between them, and comparisons have often been made.

The earlier vampire beliefs were more focused on remote villages, but they had the habit of spreading really fast. The creatures were frequently talked about in Slavic languages which were spoken in most of the Balkan Peninsula. Many ancient cultures had the evil spirits and demons which can be associated with vampires, but the vampire hysteria of Eastern Europe made such a lasting impact that nothing could match the fear generated in this

part of the world, and nothing else could spread so fast. It is also the reason for the development of different methods to slay the vampires in different areas – “The staking of the vampire, so familiar from the movies, is, in south Slavic territory, perhaps the most common method of disposing of him, and when this is done the vampire is usually reported to have bled profusely” (Barber 8). The news about vampires rising from the grave had also led to the rise of groups which wished to be vampire hunters.

Even though the vampires were united by a few common features, they were also divided according to the local flavour and different myths and folklore added to the stories. “The heart of the vrykolakas is cut out. The popular view of the matter is that it is difficult, at best, for a vampire to function without either his head or his heart” (Barber 25). The vrykolakas which had similarities to not only vampires, but also to different undead creatures including the modern concept of zombies, had their differences from wurdulacs, the better known vampires of Slavic folklore. In Russia and Ukraine, the vampires were known as upyrs. These beliefs related to vampires which was mostly part of the Eastern European myth and folklore also reached Western Europe, and beyond the continent to Great Britain, as the island nation could never stay away from the situation in continental Europe.

Corpses rising from the dead in England were that of Constance Whitney, Ernest Wicks, Alice Holden, but these incidents cannot be directly linked to the vampire attacks of Eastern Europe (Curran 45-47). The vampires of Britain were different from the others in essence, with role of the devil explained differently according to the Western Protestant tradition, different from the Orthodox and Catholic nations where the beliefs earlier thrived. Unlike the Western churches, the Eastern Orthodox churches held on to the traditional beliefs with a stronger grip. The Protestants were more concerned with reforming the church instead. “The English vampire by the end of eighteenth century was not simply a ghost or a wrath but the devil’s spirit which had possessed the body and trapped the soul of a dead sinner”

(Twitchell 8). But sins did not always define the creation of a vampire, as some of the newly formed undead were god-fearing people during their lives. These were rarely the people whom someone would expect to see as vampires after death.

Vampires as Part of Fiction

The early Gothic works propelled the vampires as they stayed close to the terrors of their own world in Britain - “Gothic fiction, for all its wanderings in desolate landscapes and invocations of diabolical forces, never strays far from home: it plays upon human fears and anxieties, its hauntings emanating as much from within as without” (Botting 131). The works like *The Vampyre*, *Varney the Vampire* and *Carmilla* popularized the Gothic idea through vampire fiction in Britain. The antagonist of *The Vampyre*, Lord Ruthven would become a perfect example of the aristocratic vampire, and continued to serve as a mirror to vampirism. Sir Francis Varney of *Varney the Vampire* also served with a number of undead tropes which were repeated in later tales about vampires. The belief in vampire throughout Britain was very much influenced by the Gothic fiction written by popular writers of the time period. There have been many varieties of the creature’s existence in British fiction though. “The vampire lives – as Transylvanian aristocrat, seductive siren, anonymous walking dead, superior nocturnal creature, or satanic master-villain, even as bumbling anachronism or as cultured, romantic hero or as troubled, isolated victim of immortality” (Waller 3). The strength of these stories determined the further progress of the tales based on vampires, and also created a different set of beliefs about the undead.

It was in the later stage of the Victorian Era, with the publication of *Dracula* that there was a certain amount of standardization of these beliefs. *The Vampyre* can also be considered as the antithesis of *Dracula*, as Lord Ruthven successfully feeds on the innocent, and is able to escape, thus proving to be triumphant as well as invincible (Waller 48-49).

Lord Ruthven would outsmart all those humans involved - “The guardians hastened to protect Miss Aubrey; but when they arrived, it was too late” (Polidori 33). Later, *Dracula* would be so popular that Count Dracula as a character would go on to symbolize the whole group of undead rising from the grave to drink blood. There were evident differences with the change of antagonist’s gender though – “While the male vampire story was a tale of domination, the female version was one of seduction. In the usual scenario, a young man has to deal with an older supernatural temptress who somehow drains his energy, leaving him weak and desperate” (Twitchell 39). The vampire novels of Victorian Era and later stages showed many similarities with each other, and at the same time, also diverged in some aspects.

Vampires in the New World

It also took some time to reach the New World, which had its own tales of horror, spread throughout a huge landmass. European settlers had to go through some constant struggles to survive in this unfamiliar territory in the early stages. The situation became better only after many skirmishes and wars, but there were existing superstitions as well as the new ones. During the time of Salem Witch Trials, there were fears about unknown creatures, as America with its dark and deep forests as well as the trackless bogs, felt like a supernatural place (Curran 55). It was called New World, but many settlers might have had the feeling of going back by many years due to the continent being scientifically backward in comparison to Europe and Asia. The three empires of Aztecs, Incas and Mayas were superior to the others in the continent, but were backward in comparison to the new invaders and settlers. But with modern technology and manpower in the form of slavery being introduced there, the continent also witnessed many changes.

There were many plantations, and different cities developed in association with them. Among them, there was New Orleans, a city on the Mississippi River, a part of Louisiana.

The whole area of Louisiana was purchased by the United States from France in 1803, and it already had several groups including Frenchmen, Spaniards, Native Americans, Blacks as well as other minorities, followed by a merging of cultures also added (LeBreton 2). The beliefs as well as superstitions of all these groups contributed to making Louisiana a land of magic and mystery. It is known for the cemeteries of New Orleans, also referred to as the Cities of the Dead, the beautiful and decorated tombs which were built to honour the dead, and also because of the water table being too high and not allowing the residents to dig too deep. The Black population also practiced Louisiana Voodoo, a combination of traditional African religions and Roman Catholicism, also had its home in Louisiana, as the territory used to be under the control of Catholic nations of France and Spain. With an eerie feeling always present in the streets, it has been serving as a perfect place for anything mysterious or sinister in nature.

Vampires of Americas in *Interview with the Vampire*

Louisiana is described by the protagonist of the novel, Louis de Pointe du Lac as a place with a difference, unlike any other in the world at that time. He talks about the French and Spanish, as well as the Irish and German immigrants, along with Native Indians, black slaves and the mixed races (Rice 39). The story is set in 1791, a time period before area was acquired by the United States. It was in 1800 that France reacquired Louisiana from Spain with the Treaty of San Ildefonso, and the world that Louis talks about, is Spanish Louisiana. This time period was known for increase in the population of both free men and slaves, as new settlers were welcomed, and they brought large numbers of slaves to work on plantations. Louis feels that it is a perfect place for vampires to exist undetected, as there were many exotic people walking in the streets, and the vampires would be not much different from most of them in comparison (Rice 40). It is to be noted that vampires have thrived in the areas which were best suited for them, and Louisiana was one of them. This is

also one of the reasons why Lestat de Lioncourt, the vampire who transformed Louis into the undead state also decided to travel all the way to this part of the New World, despite living most of his human life in France, and after being a part of Europe for a very long time. Louis has been effectively placed in this atmosphere with prevailing slavery and the mixture of different ethnicities and cultures, a world which is unique (Jang 225-228).

Vampires of Eastern Europe in *Interview with the Vampire*

The novel shows the changes in the vampire species, as Louis visits Eastern Europe with the child vampire, Claudia. They visit the areas where the peasants believe in the existence of the undead in hope of finding more of their kind, in Bulgaria, Hungary and Transylvania – in all these places, the vampires which they come across are the same. They have the vampire as a mindless animated corpse, with the appearance resembling a decayed corpse, covered with soil and blood (Rice 173). These creatures are close to their descriptions passed down orally. They were the vampires of the remote villages of Eastern Europe, who seem to be getting nowhere close to becoming civilized. They are the reflections of a world which does not provide them with much to hide, as the villagers would be quick to hunt them down and put a stake through their hearts when they are sleeping in their grave. The villages of Eastern Europe were very stubborn about their beliefs, and none of them would even think about ceasing these activities of vampire hunting. There are no tales of any master vampires giving birth to another, or any of those creatures trying to blend in with the humans. These nocturnal creatures are driven by the lust for blood, and they go for it with despair, as soon as they were transformed into the undead state.

Vampires of Western Europe in *Interview with the Vampire*

In a world which seems to have had only three vampires with ability to think and act like humans, two more are introduced when the Louis and Claudia visit Paris, where they get

an invitation to visit Theatre des Vampires, and watch a performance. The two newly found vampires who are part of this theatre, Armand and Santiago will lead them to more of their kind. This discovery would also change their path and challenge their existence as the undead. These newly found vampires lived differently, and they were like a coven in the middle of a big city where humans thrived. Louis describes Paris as the mother of New Orleans, as early settlers there were from the French city. In comparison to Paris, he considered New Orleans fragile, savage and primitive, as well as having a striving populace facing hurricanes, floods, plague and other problems – always affected by the climate of Louisiana. That world of New Orleans which was surrounded by wilderness had that kind of exotic and sophisticated life which always felt threatened (Rice 185-186). During those days, despite New Orleans being home to many French settlers, it could never thrive in the way Paris could – they were two different worlds, separated by the Atlantic Ocean.

They are in Paris years after the French Revolution, stepping into a new territory with the concept of religion pushed to the background, much different from the world of strange beliefs which existed outside. This revolution, even though not without its flaws, produced the most radical and imaginative attempt to achieve equality in history (Doyle 421). The vampires of Paris have lived through the French Revolution along with humans. Louis mentions the time period as the age of Napoleon III, which started in the middle of the 1800s, and is fascinated by the city's towering buildings, massive cathedrals, grand boulevards and ancient winding medieval streets. The area provided hope euphoria after the hopeless times of wandering in Eastern Europe (Rice 186). To a good number of people who started to believe less in God and even lesser in the clergy, there was no real place for the supernatural, in a world of liberty, equality and fraternity. This allows vampires to make their own rules during their existence in the City of Lights, and remain undetected, something which is more difficult in comparison to Louisiana's mixed world. Theatre des Vampires served as a means

to hide the existence of vampires in Paris, as the vampires killed their victims on the stage as part of plays, and presented them as highly realistic, violent performances. Such a safe house was a necessity in Paris during the time, and despite it being burned down into ashes later in the novel, did serve the purpose for the nocturnal creatures.

Conclusion

An exploration of the different lands where vampires existed in different forms would reveal that Anne Rice has placed them in her novels according to how the vampires have existed as part of culture, and how they could blend into an epoch in history. Their presence in each part of the world can be seen as related to the traditions of the area, whether it is about the remote villages of Eastern Europe, dark slave plantations of America or the grand cities of Western Europe. It can be seen that the vampire mythology has differed in each part of the world, and this change has been reflected well in the literary works which were created based on the traditional beliefs about vampires. *Interview with the Vampire* can be considered as a work which has expanded on these beliefs in an interesting manner, and has created a fictional universe consisting of different types of undead, inspiring many different vampire novels which followed. As the first book of the series, *The Vampire Chronicles*, the novel has served its purpose of establishing the vampire myth really well.

Works Cited

- Bane, Theresa. *Encyclopedia of Vampire Mythology*. McFarland & Company, 2010.
- Barber, Paul. *Vampires, Burial and Death*. Vail Ballou Press, 1988.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic Romanced: Consumption, Gender and Technology in Contemporary Fictions*, Routledge, 2008.
- Bunson, Matthew. *The Vampire Encyclopedia*. Random House, 2000.

Curran, Bob. *Encyclopedia of the Undead*. Career Press, 2006.

Doyle, William. *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

LeBreton, Marietta Marie. *A History of the Territory of Orleans, 1803-1812*. Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1969.

Jang, Ki Yoon. "Louis the Plantation Owner: The Haunting of Vampiric Slavery in Interview with the Vampire." *American Fiction Studies*, 2016, vol.9, no.2, pp. 221-247. The American Fiction Association of Korea.

Polidori, John. *The Vampyre*. Book Jungle, 2008.

Rice, Anne. *Interview with the Vampire*. Hachette, 2008.

Roland, Paul. *Ghosts*, Arcturus Publishing, 2012.

Twitchell, James B. *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*. Duke University Press, 1981.

Waller, Gregory A. *The Living and the Undead: From Bram Stoker's Dracula to Romero's Dawn of the Dead*. University of Illinois, 1986.