
THE ENDURANCE OF THE GOTHIC: THE ROMANTICS' CONTRIBUTION TO THE VAMPIRE MYTH

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Abstract: The end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, also known as the period of Romanticism, were marked with the interest of the authors in nature and emotions, but also in the supernatural, horrible and the exotic. Although it was the era of reason and the progress of sciences, critics have identified the significance of the Gothic influence on the works of most of the English Romantic figures, among which Lord Byron is known to have had the major influence on the creation and persistence of the vampire figure, as a Gothic trope, haunting the last and this century's literature and film. This paper attempts to unravel the origins and nature of the mysterious cultural appeal to the literary vampire by tracing its origins from Eastern European folklore, the first poem titled "Der Vampir"(1743) by Heinrich Ossenfelder, to the German *Sturm and Drang* poets, such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Gottfried August Buerger and their respective poems "Die Braut von Korinth" (1789) and "Lenore" (1773). The role of British ballad writers Southey, Lewis and Scott and their ballad collections will be considered as a significant effort to "renew the spirit" of British poetry which according to Scott had reached "a remarkably low ebb in Britain" (as cited in Thomson, 2002, p.80). Another literary figure engaged in writing Gothic ballads following the tradition of Mathew Lewis, not so well-known during her time, was the Scottish writer Anne Bannerman. Her ballad "Dark Ladie" deserves special attention in this context, as it features a female character who is transformed from the previous ballad tradition: from a passive victim of male seduction, here she becomes a fatal woman who comes back from the undead to seek for revenge and initiates the line of female vampires such as Keats's "Lamia" and Coleridge's "Christabel". Thus, this paper elaborates on the major contributors to the Gothic stream in poetry in the specific period, mainly ballads, and traces the presence and development of Gothic elements and vampiric features. The continuous appeal to the Gothic found its place in the works of several major English Romantics, even though they put great effort to differentiate their poetry from the popular literature of the day – Gothic novels. This paper will concentrate on Lord Byron's Oriental tale *The Giaour* (1813) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). Both works incorporate Gothic themes, settings and characters, but there hasn't been much literary focus with reference to the vampire theme they are based on. Although, critics have observed the contribution of the ambivalent vampire figure in Romantic literature, critical evaluation of the growth of this Gothic character in these two poems until now is incomplete. Hence, we will focus on Byron and Coleridge's appropriation of the vampire figure and their contribution to the growth of this character. The various metaphoric usages of this character will also be explored and defined to determine their purpose

Keywords: Gothic, Romanticism, vampire figure, origins, metaphoric usage

1. INTRODUCTION

"The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. – When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it; and reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil,"

William Wordsworth's ideas about poetry in the renowned Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* (1802), a groundbreaking collection of poems that outlines the basic characteristics of the Romantic movement, in a way, provides what can be defined as the Romantic poets' viewpoint of the Gothic. Most of the Romantic poets had negative feelings and expressed indignation against the popular taste in Britain. They paid special attention to emphasize its distinction from their own literary creations. Most of the major poets of this time made sure that their Transcendent Romanticism was placed in opposition to the low Gothic, which according to Wordsworth, served to quench Britain's "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation". In the distinction between a high and low literary culture the Romantics were not quite sincere as many of their literary creations according to Annette Wheeler have connections with the Gothic novel (1994, p. 84). The purpose of this paper is to propose that not only are Romanticism and the Gothic connected with themes and motifs such as the guilt-haunted wanderer and his psychological state mirrored in the sublime nature but they are "in dialogue with each other", as stated by Emma McEnvoy (2007, p.27) One the most ironic argument is that most major Romantic poets, except for Blake and

Wordsworth, were reading Gothic literature while creating their works in obvious Gothic style. As Brendan Hennessy has asserted, “both interior and exterior settings in the Romantic poets often produce unmistakable echoes of the Gothic novels they consumed” (1978, p. 38). Several of the productions of the major Romantics are deeply rooted into the Gothic but have managed to obscure the interrelatedness. Among them are Coleridge’s *Christabel* (1798–1801), and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Percy Shelley’s *Zastrozzi: A Romance* (1810), Byron’s *The Giaour* (1813) and *Manfred* (1817), as well as Keats’s *Lamia* (1819). In his “Romantic Gothic”, Peter Garside justly observes, “... nearly all the leading Romantic poets were affected, directly or indirectly, by Gothic influences, and a number of canonical texts of the period resist satisfactory interpretation without an awareness of Gothic convention” (1998, p. 315).

Undeniably, as Stephen Prickett has asserted “the Gothic offered the Romantics a symbolism and a language for expressing kinds of experience for which no alternative conceptual framework was then available, and often uncannily anticipate and illustrate the theories of later psychologists like Freud” (Gothic, 1999, p. 527). The Romantics exploited the fascinating ideas and themes of the Gothic to keep its massive audiences, while at the same time employed and obscured their considerable Gothic borrowings. Analysis of the various connections between the Gothic and Romanticism in some of the most significant Romantic texts discloses a more distinct idea of the tremendous role the gothic played in the production of much Romantic literature.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF THE LITERARY VAMPIRE

A crucial point in understanding vampires in literature, would be to explore their shift from folklore and superstition into literature. It is the combination of its folkloric elements with Gothic horror, initially ballads, which produced the literary vampire. Gothic horror covers a one-hundred-year period, starting with the first Gothic novel by Horace Walpole *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 till late nineteenth century. However, it reaches its greatest popularity between 1780s and 1824.

Despite the difficulty of defining Gothic, Gothic works share some common components, including temporal or spatial displacement, settings which often involve run-down castles with gloomy atmospheres, and inhabited with pensive heroes and innocent maidens. These stories are frequently presented by multiple voices, using different narrators, letters, and other records, so that the reader is put in a position to question the "validity of the testimony" as the "ambiguous perceptions often foreground the clash between a spiritual and purely material view of reality" (Carter, 1986, p. 119).

Noel Carroll (1990) tries to define the human appeal to horror in literature and to trace the cultural moments when aesthetic representations of horror flourished. He concludes that it has the tendency or reoccurring particularly in times of social stress. He gives evidence of vampire films such as "Nosferatu" by F. W. Murnau, which appeared in 1922 during the Weimar Republic in Germany; and the Great Depression in the United States when "the Universal classics of horror" emerged (1990, p. 207). In a specific social context, he argues, "the horror genre is capable of incorporating or assimilating general social anxieties into its iconography of fear and distress" (1990, p. 207). In respect of this thesis, the cultural theory of the unfolding of horror in literature can be applied to the vampire theme in literature in the eighteenth century. As it will be presented here, the folkloric vampire originated in the areas of armed conflict between the two major empires, the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, in Eastern and Central Europe and reached western poets and philosophers in the official records of Austrian governmental officials and clergy. The vampire figure was assimilated by poets, initially in German ballads, as a metaphor of human's aggressive nature.

The initialization of the vampire in literature is generally based on one specific genre- the ballad, that is, the German *Schauerballade*. The ballad genre served particularly well to the vampire theme because of its origins in the folksong, and its flexibility in form and content. The term *Schauerballade* is a combination of horror (Schauer) and aesthetics (ballad poetry), where the first word denotes the effect it produces on the reader or listener, and the second defines its genre. The vampire's first and most influential manifestations in literature were by German poets, namely Heinrich Ossenfelder's short poem "Der Vampir" (1743), Gottfried August Burger's "Lenore" (1773) and Johann Wolfgang Goethe's "Die Braut von Korinth" (1789).

Ossenfelder's "The Vampire" is a 24-line poem in Anacreontic style. It is a poem in which the lover expresses his discontent that his beloved has rejected his courting and has turned to her mother's advice. The vampire image in this poem is significant in that it pertains an erotic charge and portends a later development of the literary vampire figure. Here, the vampire is presented as a nocturnal creature and an enticer who creeps into the girl's chamber. What is evident from the close reading of the text, is that Ossenfelder conflates the common features

from the vampire reports, for instance, the action will take part when the victim is asleep, then the reference of the Tokay wine region in Hungary, which was well-known for this superstition. However, he also introduces some new traits, such as: the speaker of the poem is a person who is like a vampire or vampire; the young girl will turn into vampire, once attacked by him, and there is a salacious element in his rendezvous with the victim.

On the other hand, when Burger's ballad "Lenore" came out in 1773, it greatly stirred the vampiric horror in Romantic writings in Germany and England. First translated by William Taylor and then Sir Walter Scott, it was printed many times. Burger never employed the word *vampire* for Lenore's beloved Wilhelm, who is a revenant as he visits Lenore after his death. "Lenore" offered thematic elements that inspired not only Gothic authors, but nineteenth century vampire fiction as well, such as: the undead as only a nocturnal creature, the coffin which they have to return before the sun rises, the image of the full moon above the graveyard; and the transformation of the vampire into the personified image of death as a skeleton with a scythe in his hands.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was one of the main advocates of the German *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) literary movement, which appeared in the 1770s. In *Die Braut von Korinth* Goethe's introduced the first female literary vampire based on an ancient Greek tale of the *Lamia*, a ghost story, which Goethe transformed into a vampire story. Although the word vampire has not been used overtly in the ballad, it is known that Goethe referred to it in his daily notebook as "vampyrischen Gedichtes" (as cited in Barkhoff, 2008, p.131). The vampire nature of the girl in this poem has been blended with the characteristics of the *femme fatale* or the *belle dame sans merci*, a "seductress who destroys the man who loves her" (Leavy, 1988, p. 169). According to Leavy, this character is either mortal or immortal. The first nature is ascribed to the *femme fatal*, whereas the latter to the *belle dame sans merci*. This character has existed in the mythology and folklore of many ancient people, from the Greek Sirens, Lamia and Harpies, the Celtic fairy Morgaine, to the Jewish Lilith and the Babylonian Talmud. German's mythology also had the *femme fatale* which was central in folktales of Undine and Tannhauser (Daemmrich, 1987. p. 103). But it did not come into literary existence until the end of the eighteenth century in Goethe's *Der Braut von Korinth*. This is a type of vampire *femme fatale* which will have its subsequent Romantic representatives in Coleridge's *Christabel* and Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *Lamia*.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was a period of great popularity of Gothic ballads not only in Germany, in England as well. In fact, the trend had originally started in Britain with Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), avidly read in Germany, which tracked its way back to England. Percy's *Reliques* consisted of three volumes of one hundred and eighty ballads and firmly impressed Southey, Lewis, Scott, Wordsworth and Coleridge (Hoeveler, 2010, p. 164). This is the period when the ballad traversed from oral tradition to a literary form of narrative poetry (Gerould, 1957, p. 84). The collection of ballads involved some old and some modelled by the Scottish and English folk ballads and set off a "ballad craze" (Hoeveler, 2010, p. 164).

Having read Taylor's adaptation "Lenora", Walter Scott became immensely fascinated with the German ballad, so he began translating Burger's works. In 1796, his first publications of "Die Wilde Jäger" as "The Wild Chase" and "Lenore" as "William and Helen" came out. He believed that "the prevailing taste in [Germany] might be easily employed as a formidable auxiliary to renewing the spirit of our own" poetry (as cited in Thomson, 2002, p.80). He found English poetry in the last decade of the eighteenth century to have reached a "remarkably low ebb in Britain" (as cited in Thomson, 2002, p.80). Two years later, he was requested by Lewis to contribute to his first ballad collection initially titled *Tales of Terror*. Lewis's collection appeared in 1801 under the title *Tales of Wonder* and consisted of sixty ballads in two volumes; the first one contained mainly original ballads, and the second some translations of German ballads combined with some ballads by Burns, Dryden, Johnson and others. Robert Southey also furnished eight ballads to the *Tales of Wonder*. In "The old Woman of Berkeley" (1802), also inspired by Burger's "Lenore", he undertook to "restore the pure stream of 'German sublimity'" (Chandler, 2003, 8). Lewis's ballads "Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogine" and "The Bleeding Nun" were already popular due to having been interspersed earlier in his novel *The Monk* (1796).

Another literary figure who was engaged in writing Gothic ballads following the tradition of Mathew Lewis, not so well-known during her time, was the Scottish writer Anne Bannerman (1765-1829). The first volume of poetry that she published was *Poems* (1800), which was followed by *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* two years later. Two of her ballads which present *femme fatales* deserve to be mentioned in this context with reference to their endowed vampiric qualities, "The Dark Ladie" and "The Perjured Nun". Craciun explains the publication history of the ballad with its character of a "sister tale" to Coleridge's "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie," printed a month earlier in the *Edinburgh Magazine*. Bannerman's ballad came out in the same magazine with a footnote pointing to Coleridge's earlier poem (Craciun, 2004, p. 209). This ballad, however, is quite different from

Coleridge's because it reverses the roles of the "Dark Ladie": from a passive victim of male seduction she becomes a fatal woman who comes back from the undead to seek for revenge.

3. COLERIDGE'S RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

Of the six major Romantic poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley is often mentioned as most inclined to the Gothic. As profound as was the Gothic influence on Shelley, the assertion can likewise refer to Coleridge, who frequently wrote Gothic reviews in the *Critical Review*. In addition there were his epistolary and notebook remarks on the genre which disclose his great familiarity with Gothic writers such as Maturin, Lewis, Radcliffe, Godwin and the German Romantics (Letter to Bowles, 1797). The conspicuous influence of the Gothic on Coleridge is particularly noticeable in some of his major works, especially in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and *Christabel* (1798–1801). The former of which is said to employ an enduring influence on the Gothic by way similar to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), as both works represent an anguished transgressor in an awe-inspiring polar setting.

Both Coleridge's poems present sinful transgressions and are immersed in Christian symbolism, which take the reader to the emblematic cosmos of Walpole's *Otranto*. The Ancient Mariner is a cursed, perpetual wanderer, a typical Gothic character in that he is obsessed by a transgression and he is bound to repeatedly tell his story as a way of confession.

In looking into "The Ancient Mariner" as a text with vampire theme, Twitchell contends, "when Coleridge first sat down in 1797, he had planned to write a vampire poem" (1981, p. 146). Nevertheless, he argues that on Wordsworth's insistence Coleridge was persuaded to smooth out some of the more direct references to vampirism in the versions that followed. James Twitchell emphasizes the chance that Coleridge had been acquainted with vampire folklore. He points to the reason why *The Ancient Mariner* should be read as a vampire poem by directing to the "almost... totemic" (1981, p. 147) usage of blood when the Mariner bites and sucks the blood of his arm in order to quench his thirst, and the hypnotic look of his eyes on his listeners.

Coleridge employs the popular ballad form to present a tale about a marvelous event. The poem begins with the Ancient Mariner embarking on a voyage. He is on a ship with his crew and they see the church, the hill, and the lighthouse behind them. They travel out into the open sea, but we are not told where they are sailing and what the purpose of the journey is. Until they arrive at the area of the equator, they experience what seems to be considered as normal life aboard ship. There is nothing unusual about the journey and the sun as usual continues to rise and set. They are followed by clear weather and a good wind to move the ship southward. After a while, however, a storm appears and carries the ship even more distant southward into an unknown area where they will endure a sublime state of isolation and loss of sensory power. The circumstances will bring the Ancient Mariner into a liminal state of either dream or reality in which he will meet the ambiguous Life-in-Death figure. The encounter with the Life-in-Death vampire figure helps the Mariner to become aware of the necessity for a connection with the universe, the divine power, and gain insight into his estranged existence by going through the state of Life-in-Death himself. Ultimately, he manages to reintegrate with the universe, and relatively with society, as in the final part he undertakes the task of spreading the knowledge about the cosmic unity on his voyage "from land to land," (line 620) telling the marvelous tale to his listeners. As a way of paying his penance and through his experience as vampire, the Mariner is the medium through which the Hermit, the Wedding Guest, and everyone who hears or reads his story to connect to a divine sense of the universe. In this chapter it will be argued that the encounter with sublime experiences bring the Mariner in contact with the Life-in-Death vampire figure and experience a life-in-death state. This otherworldly experience is significant for it enables him to associate with the divine and feel the need of a reunion with the cosmos.

James B. Twitchell, in "The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature", states "the Romantics ... rarely if ever wrote about vampires as vampires; instead the vampire was the means to achieve various ends" (1981, p. 38). The figure of the vampire in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is used to establish the reality of the alienated human existence. It also assists in the ensuing reunion of humanity with the divine cosmos. The Mariner's isolation, not only from other human beings, but also from God and his own self, becomes evident when he comes across the otherworldly. He undergoes a complete loss of self as he kills an innocent creature that links him to the ordinary world and God. Cast somewhere beyond the realities of time and space and from human relationship, and enduring spiritual alienation because of his transgression, the Mariner is able to comprehend his situation with the help of the otherworldly experience of the vampire. The Life-in-Death vampire figure acts on a psychological level by wasting the Mariner's energy. This female vampire manages to do this without spilling any blood. Whereas, the Mariner has spilled blood twice. He killed the albatross and drained his own blood, thus

becoming a vampire and a victim. As a result of the blood-shedding acts he performs, he is exposed to a supernatural experience, in which the encounter with the vampire figure Life-in-Death will enervate him and seize him in a transcendent state, beyond physical and the spiritual reality.

4. BYRON'S *THE GIAOUR*

The basic outline of the *The Giaour* is about three people: Hassan, a Muslim chief, Laila, one of his wives in the Haram, and the Giaour, a Non-Muslim Venetian. After the revelation of the illegitimate love affair Laila has “with the faithless Giaour” (p. 458), Hassan punishes her with death by drowning. The Giaour takes revenge for her death by taking the life of Hassan and dooms himself to spend the remainder of his life in grief and torment.

So far, there has been a substantial attention by critics on the Gothic features in *Manfred* over the other works of Byron. In *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley*, Bertrand Evans refers to Manfred when he states that it “best represents the high romantic expression, in dramatic form, of the Gothic spirit” (232). What Evans overlooked is the use of Gothic in Byron's other works, such as *The Giaour*. Manfred's deep experience of remorse as a Gothic trope certainly applies to the Giaour, who undergoes similar suffering throughout the poem.

Byron's contribution to the Gothic can also be seen in the fact that he was one of the first authors to incorporate the vampire theme into British literature. Despite the fact that this is refuted by some critics, such as Thorslev, who dispels the idea that Byron propelled the nineteenth-century literary mode of vampirism. Mario Praz, in *The Romantic Agony*, on the other hand, claims that “A love-crime becomes an integral part of vampirism, though often in forms so far removed as to obscure the inner sense of the gruesome legend,” and by this he supposes that Byron engendered the myth (1970, p. 78). The fisherman's curse cast on the Giaour because of Hassan's murder contains the poem's most overt vampiric lines. The beginning of the fisherman's curse not only likens the Giaour to a vampire, but also prefigures his imminent life path: “But first, on earth as Vampire sent, / Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent; / Then ghastly haunt thy native place” (lines 755-758). Explaining the fisherman's curse, Jerome McGann asserts, “The Turks curse draws him to a life of spiritual agony and—what is worse—insures its hereditary character” (1968, p. 157). By explaining the “hereditary character” McGann clarifies that it is congenital, and as such implies a physical indication of the curse, and thus he concurs that Byron wanted to depict the Giaour's transformation as actually a physical one, “outward sign of the Giaour's own sickness” (1968, p. 160). The fisherman's curse not only enacts physical changes in the Giaour, it also alters his soul. From the Giaour's confession we learn that the loss of Leila and the curse thrown to him by the Muslim fisherman change him into a vampire when he exclaims, “yet I breathed, / But not the breath of human life” (lines 1293-1294). These lines show that the Giaour's transformation surpasses simple change of bodily form. The phrase “souls absorbed like mine” reifies that the curse also affects his soul (line 1326). He is repetitively portrayed as a timeless being as his body is “trapped in the ‘stream of life’”, which is an existence comparable to that of a vampire who according to legend is “doomed to wander between life and death” (Lussier, 2000 p.127). Along with stressing the Giaour's timeless existence and ghastly look, Byron depicts his enormous mental capacities. The Giaour is endowed with the abilities to comprehend an idea which is “infinite as boundless space” (line 275) and happens “in Time's record nearly nought” (line 273), similar to Coleridge's Mariner, who is bound to travel around the world and has the ability to tell his story in different languages. His supernatural powers place him beyond the human realm, as does his vampire-like nature as a creature for whom “Unfit for earth, undoom'd for heaven” (line 438). Despite his enormous capacities the Giaour, remains helpless to change his tragic condition. The only change he would wish is to die and join his beloved Laila in death. Vampires are doomed to live eternally in the space between life and death, nonetheless, the Giaour is granted liberation from this cursed state. In the final part, the Giaour at first asks the priest “talk no more of penitence” (line 1202). This has often been explained as the Giaour's lack of will to repent and ask for forgiveness. It is the Giaour's belief that words cannot undo the deeds that had been done, as he ultimately confesses his wrongdoing close to the end of the poem where he turns to the friar as “Confessor” (line 1320). In this case, the Giaour's confession probably leads towards absolution of his sins, thus the curse being removed the Giaour is able to finally rest and join Laila in death.

5. CONCLUSION

In the development of the figure of the Gothic hero-villain, Byron's Gioaur and Coleridge's Mariner provide accomplished portraits of eternal, remorseful Gothic hero-villains. The Giaour's tortured soul melancholically yearns for death, whereas the Mariner is caught up in an eternal loop of confession. The Giaour as a *homme fatal* is

cursed to destroy the only human being he loves, but through his “confession” is eventually granted the chance for peace in death.

Coleridge, on the contrary, leaves his vampire-like Mariner perpetually ramble the world and compulsively tell his story as a kind of punishment for his sins, in a transcendent state, beyond the physical and spiritual reality. With the Mariner’s transformation into a vampire, he is enabled to reunite with the cosmos. His relationship to the divine rests on his creative ability to spread the knowledge of the cosmic rules to humanity. By telling the story of his marvelous journey, he replenishes his energy. While doing this, paradoxically, while being a vampire he realizes himself as human. In addition, he manages to avoid the sense of purposelessness in life by playing the role of a transmitter of a cosmic message.

Both protagonists have their origins in the Gothic hero-villain, but have transformed into a complex metaphor for the meaningfulness of human life through committing transgressive acts which have thrown them in a state of perpetual torture.

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