

**Bloodsucking Structures:
American Female Vampires as Class Structure Critique
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Much scholarship has been devoted to explicating the outlaw sexuality of female vampires as their primary characteristic. Nevertheless, this focus on the sexual aspect of the female vampire, an aspect also present but less central to the male vampire, obscures the power struggles and potential economic and political impact implicit in the literature and lore of the vampire--ironically, a creature usually depicted as devoid of genital sexuality.

The vampire's innate characteristics surely provide potent clues to the real nature of human beings and their social and economic interactions. The vampire is immortal, surviving from the life-giving blood of humanity and therefore inexorably linked to their world, and is a knowing Other that is privy to what we do at night when goodly society retires to its bed and looks away. These traits allow the vampire to fix a clearer gaze on the human condition than we, with our limitations, ever can. Further, the vampire operates on an almost purely economic level. Living without the genital sexuality that Freud suggests provides the motivation for human interaction, the vampire as mythos examines the material motivations of relationships. The vampire takes, unless the vampire finds exceptional beauty in what it is taking, and then it still takes but also gives the dubious gift of an eternal life. In this way, the vampire reproduces not its own good qualities, but its own need to consume.

How do vampires, capable of living across centuries of societal and economic change, fit into the social order within a given work of literature, and how does that reflect the political intentions of its author?

Critic Louis Gross in his book Redefining the American Gothic: from Wieland to Day of the Dead says, "the lore of the vampire is particularly suited to Gothic narrative for its power to show demonism as an inversion of the religious and social order" (48). The vampire is, as a trope, invested with the power to critique, uphold or destroy the culture in which the author sets it (just as that culture is sometimes invested with the power to critique, uphold and destroy the vampire). Folklorist Paul Barber writes of the vampire, "To be a vampire, it seems, is to be power-mad, in the grip of a compulsion..." (83). Indeed, the vampire is all id. It is the undying infant whose suckling yields death in every mother it chooses. It is forced by its nature to abandon regular human living, with its variety of expressions and appetites, to feed an all-consuming hunger for blood that never dies out or is completely sated. Yet, according to Barber, the traditional European male literary vampire seems to have it fairly easy:

The vampire of fiction has traditionally led an uncomplicated life, except when he wishes to travel and is obliged to take with him both his coffin and a supply of dirt from his original burial place. For the most part, however, such a vampire lives quietly in his castle, having none but a parasitic relationship with his neighbor. The very name of the castle, when uttered by a visitor, will frequently send these neighbors into shock. (83)

This description might easily be one of a traditional feudal lord whose powers are limited to the area he rules (hence the problematic travel) and whose neighbors are the serfs whose labor he so merrily leeches for his continued luxury, while living "quietly in his castle." The castle itself, a powerful trope in gothic literature, frequently represents oppression in all its forms: social and economic class dominance and patriarchal authority, for example. In other words, the perfect place for Dracula to live.

Dracula: Marx's Capitalist Vampire

The most famous of literary vampires, Bram Stoker's Dracula, exemplifies this sort of feudal power at the beginning of the novel. Dracula lives in a large Transylvanian castle, "a vast ruined castle, from whose tall black windows came no ray of light, and whose broken battlements showed a jagged line against the sky" (Stoker, ch. 1). Jonathan Harker's observations of the castle decor also demonstrate that feudalism in Transylvania is still alive and functioning:

There are certain odd deficiencies in this house considering the extraordinary evidence of wealth which are round me. The table service is of gold, and so beautifully wrought that it must be of immense value. The curtains and upholstery of the chairs and sofas and the hangings of my bed are of the costliest and most beautiful fabrics, and must have been of fabulous value when they were made, for they are centuries old, though in excellent order. I saw something like them in Hampton Court, but they were worn and frayed and moth-eaten. But still in none of the rooms is there a mirror. (Stoker, ch. 2)

Here, Jonathan reveals another important characteristic of the traditional vampire, the lack of reflection. The inability to be seen in a mirror means that not only can the vampire never be self-aware, which is a reiteration of the idea of the vampire as undying infant, but also the vampire cannot be inverted as the mirror inverts an image. This may be because, as Gross has suggested, the vampire is already an inversion of humanity.

Dracula's Castle is a place wholeheartedly avoided by the poor villagers who live nearby and who try to convince the unfortunate Jonathan Harker that a visit to the Count is generally a Very Bad Idea. The feudal system implied here is clearly critiqued when the lord of the manor is most literally a blood-sucking menace, who must be continually rebuffed by religious icons.

Dracula is eventually thwarted by his own turn to ambition as he seeks to possess more land, goods and people and pulls up stake (pardon the pun), moving his coffin full of home turf with him to England like a good modern capitalist. Early on he explains to Jonathan his desire to master the new order, the British modes of capitalism:

Well, I know that, did I move and speak in your London, none there are who would not know me for a stranger. That is not enough for me. Here I am noble. I am a Boyar. The common people know me, and I am master. But a stranger in a strange land, he is no one. Men know him not, and to know not is to care not for. I am content if I am like the rest, so that no man stops if he sees me, or pauses in his speaking if he hears my words, 'Ha, ha! A stranger!' I have been so long master that I would be master still, or at least that none other should be master of me. (Stoker, ch. 2)

Yet once he arrives in England he finds that being the master is not as easy outside of the feudal system, and he is defeated largely by two harbingers of the new social order: Van Helsing and Mina.

Van Helsing's rationalist, scientific background allows him to undermine the supernatural threat of Dracula through intelligent study, open-mindedness and the application of scientific solutions. Mina, as a representative of the New Woman, is "very much a woman of her time: a budding secretary, one whose stenographic work on her 'Traveler's Typewriter' proves crucial to the destruction of the infamous Count" (Fleissner 417). Mina's clerical work and as "an assistant schoolmistress" would seem to indicate that she is middle, rather than upper class, placing her socially beneath not only the Count, but her seemingly leisure class friend, Lucy, who becomes his victim.

Lucy's life is dominated by male influence. She struggles to choose between three suitors—themselves all good wealthy capitalists including a doctor, Dr. Seward, an American, Quincey Morris, and the man she chooses, Arthur Holmwood, who is more like Dracula than the others in that he has gained his wealth by inheritance rather than work. These three, Count Dracula and Dr. Van Helsing all scuffle to win her body and soul from each other while she remains primarily helpless. Only in death, or undeath, does she finally act by something of her own agency, but even here it is only her hunger that motivates her as she begins stalking the poor and sucking their blood. Mina, rooted in middle-class values, is not so easily swayed to this life of vampirism. Dracula, coming from a very traditionally consumer view of women says "Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall be mine-my creatures to do my bidding and to be my jackels when I want to feed" (Stoker, ch 21). Indeed, Dracula attempts to win the women over in a way that mimics conventional romantic seduction, but once he gets them they do not become agents of their own destiny as vampires any more than they likely were as nineteenth century women. The three female vampires that he keeps in his castle, for instance, are clearly ruled by him. As they attempt to feed on Jonathan, Dracula intervenes, and as Jonathan describes, his wrath over their temporary denial of the Law of the Father is fierce:

The thick eyebrows that met over the nose now seemed like a heaving bar of white hot metal. With a fierce sweep of his arm, he hurled the woman from him, and then motioned to the

others, as though he were beating them back. It was the same imperious gesture that I had seen used to the wolves. In a voice which, though low and almost in a whisper seemed to cut through the air and then ring in the room he said, "How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? Back, I tell you all! This man belongs to me! Beware how you meddle with him, or you'll have to deal with me." (Stoker, ch. 2)

. Clearly, Dracula was not ready to handle the New Woman who would not be so easily taken or easily ruled within the patriarchal framework in which he thrives.

Together with their companions, Mina and Van Helsing "monopolize means of production and investment far more extensive in scope than the vampire's reproductive capacity" (McKee 8). In other words, they are able to overthrow the capitalist regime of Count Dracula before it takes root in England, largely because of the resources they themselves can access. Bram Stoker's Dracula is not a triumph over capitalism, merely over capitalist oppression in its oldest and most "vampiric" forms. The notion of vampire as symbol of capitalist oppression is certainly not original to Stoker, who was doubtlessly influenced by or at least aware of the works of Karl Marx and other socialists who considered the vampire something of a patron saint to capitalists.

Discussing Marx, critic Andrew Smith says his "rhetorical fulcrum in this respect relies on an imaginative juxtaposition with images drawn from the pre-capitalist world. Hence, it is no coincidence that he keeps coming back to these occult pictures" (7). Or as Ken Gilder writes in his book Reading the Vampire, "modern capitalism here is by its very nature excessive, driven by 'irresistible force' to consume and accumulate. Marx draws on the metaphor of the vampire time and again to describe its processes" (20).

Critic Steve Shaviro gives us an even more detailed view of Marx's use of the vampire motif, More generally, vampires and zombies are vital (if that is the right word) to the functioning of capitalist society. Traditional Marxist theory, of course, focuses on vampires. Marx himself famously describes capital as 'dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks' . (281-282)

But what happens when vampirism becomes the tool of the disenfranchised, those who are not, by nature or birthright, the locus of capitalist power?

American women writers in the gothic tradition have played with this notion in a number of works and with a number of outcomes, for example in Jewelle Gomez's The Gilda Stories: A Novel, Anne Rice's Interview with a Vampire, and Mary Wilkins Freeman's short story Luella Miller. Each re-reading of the vampire trope newly appraises the potential of such a creature to act as a mirror to the economic realities or possibilities of human life.

The Gilda Stories: Creating Alternative Underground Economies

The Gilda Stories takes the old standards of vampire life and turns them around by creating an heroic vampire who is not only a woman, but a former slave and a lesbian In nearly every possible way, this vampire embodies the American Other. When we first meet the heroine, she has no name. Saved by Gilda, a vampire who happens to also be the madam of a brothel and the lover of a Native American woman named Bird, the heroine slowly becomes indoctrinated into the ways of the vampire.

Eventually, Gilda makes her a vampire and destroys herself, as she has become tired of living after so many centuries. The new Gilda, as she is now named, chronicles her adventures through living in California in 1890, Missouri in 1921, Massachusetts in 1955, New York in 1981, and New Hampshire in 2020. In each lifetime, as it were, Gilda is seeking, or sometimes briefly finding Bird, who ran off after getting into a relationship with the new Gilda because she feels she needs to find herself among the Native American people.

Additionally, Gilda moves in and out of various relationships with women, either vampire or human, that never quite work out as she hopes or intends largely because she has to remain such an outsider on so many levels: her class background, her race, her sex, her sexual identification, and now, her vampirism. She perpetually seeks out other outsiders, but in helping them to gain acceptance in their own communities, she inevitably loses them as they go where she cannot follow.

Gomez overcomes Marx's vision of vampirism by turning the act of obtaining blood into a socialist exchange rather than a capitalist takeover. In this sample passage, Gilda is overcome with

sympathy for the woman she takes blood from, who is a victim of the patriarchy that has killed her spirits and made her suicidal more than of the vampirism Gilda intends upon her:

Gilda peered into the creamy white features, wondering where along the short path this one had traveled she'd lost her ability to dream...Gilda felt such sorrow at this diminished capacity for life, she had to restrain the impulse to shake her awake and preach to her of the need for dreams. Instead, she held her in her sleep and pulled her into her own arms. A small incision at the side of the neck. Blood seeping out slowly...Gilda put her lips to the trickle of blood and turned it into a tide washing through her, making her heart pump faster. Her insistent suckling created a new pulse and filled her with new life. In return, she offered dreams. She held the girl's body and mind tightly, letting the desire for future life flow through them both, a promising reverie of freedom and challenge...Her [the girl's] resurgent dreams cast a new glow in Gilda's life: in giving dreams she had recaptured her own. (123-124)

In her article, "Women and Vampires: Nightmare or Utopia?" Judith Johnson says of Gilda, Gomez's vampire, thus, becomes a kind of American Everywoman engaged in a pilgrimage throughout our history, our society and our hanging ideas about life, love, responsibility and the proper place of Woman. Lyrical scenes of blood 'exchanges' alternate with scenes in which Gilda and her friends and lovers defend themselves from danger and exploitation, and learn to control their blood hunger and live responsibly in a just vampire society. (73)

This system of exchange and justice is a new standard in vampire fiction that Gomez consciously manipulates to demonstrate the potential for an Other underground that meets its needs humanely.

Judith Johnson compares this to Varney, the Vampire, a nineteenth century, more traditional vampire tale. What she says could just as easily be applied to Dracula or other vampire literature and legend:

Where Gilda's 'exchange' of blood is an obvious metaphor for a particular kind of economy of the erotic, in which both partners must be satisfied and in which neither may be bought or sold, Varney's 'feast' is a blunt metaphor for rape...Gilda leaves her lover with dreams that will give her new strength for life, and restores her own human capacity to dream in the process. Varney leaves his victim dead and drained. (74)

Yet not all the vampires that Gilda knows are equally inclined to live according to this just system that the vampire "family" has created.

Remembering that the original Gilda and then Gilda the heroine of the novel live for a time as a madam of a brothel, Gomez does not speak out against prostitution when it is also done as a respectful exchange.

However, in the course of Gilda's adventures, she meets a vampire pimp named Fox, a black male who exploits and abuses not only his vampiric victims but also his prostitutes, specifically a young girl named Toya that Gilda seeks to protect.

In a harrowing scene, Gilda and Bird confront and kill the vampire pimp, successfully ousting him from both vampire and human community, "Gilda pulled the heart from his body and threw it onto the sand, glad to be rid of its disturbing rhythm" (163).

Gomez demonstrates that in order for a fair exchange economy to function, all its members must work in concert with the rules, and gives a fairly violent solution to dealing with the outlaw—not only must he be destroyed but his very "rhythm" eradicated. Gomez's novel provides a great deal to think about in terms of developing alternative economic arrangements but leaves the reader with very few solid answers. Although at the end of the novel, Gilda finally locates a place where she is no longer so Othered, it is well into the future (2050), and one must assume that Gomez believes that the Other in modern society is merely one who is ahead of their time and must wait for the rest of the culture to catch up.

Interview with the Vampire: Critiquing American Capitalism

While Gomez argues for an alternative economic community, Anne Rice critiques what currently exists. Rice's Louis and Lestat may grapple with homoerotic marginalization in Interview with the

Vampire, but they are also firmly entrenched in the upper class. Louis is a member of an upper class land and slave owning family when he becomes a vampire. Indeed, a large part of Lestat's attraction to Louis is a result of a desire to attain his house, as Louis himself recounts, "You see, he wanted Pointe du Lac, my plantation" (13).

Lestat clearly fits into the Marxist idea of the capitalist vampire. Louis, caught up in the matrix of confusion about his sexual identity, fails to develop the same ruthlessness that Lestat has. After all, even though Louis can pass, in his interior life he is Other. Lestat is uncompromisingly consumptive, completely unconcerned with anything but the feeding of his hungers. American culture has loved Lestat because we understand him. What character greater exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit that we both revere and revile?

It is out of the unlikely marriage of these two personalities that the female vampire, Claudia, is born. As Linda Badley explains in her book Writing Horror and the Body,

In his craving for lost innocence, Louis becomes a self-flagellating masochist and pederast. When he finds a five-year-old waif crying beside the plague infested body of her mother, he rationalizes that he should put the child out of her misery. But Lestat, hoping to keep Louis with him makes her into a vampire (Claudia) and the purity and intensity of the child's hunger makes her the voracious, efficient killer Louis can never be. (108)

Claudia is, when Louis finds her, one of what Lestat calls "starving children, orphans...children of plague and fever" (89). Her adoption by Louis and Lestat raises her social status because she now lives off their economic wealth as well as the wealth of their immortality and affection for her. Her ruthlessness in the "purity and intensity" of her hunger makes her even more unforgiving capitalist than even Lestat. As Louis describes:

And to watch her kill was chilling. She would sit alone in the dark square waiting for the kindly gentleman or woman to find her, her eyes more mindless than I had ever seen Lestat's. Like a child numbed with fright she would whisper her plea for help to her gentle, admiring patrons, and as they carried her out of the square, her arms would fix about their necks, her tongue between her teeth, her vision glazed with consuming hunger. They found death early in those first years, before she learned to play with them, to lead them to the doll shop or the café where they gave her steaming cups of chocolate or tea to ruddy her pale cheeks, cups she pushed away, waiting, waiting, as if feasting silently on their terrible kindness. (100-101)

Yet for Claudia, the tragedy begins to unfold as she realizes that despite growing up mentally and emotionally, her body will remain forever that of a child. Though she develops a woman's longings and hopes, anyone she meets, including Lestat and Louis who regard her as their "doll", treats her as a child.

Her fury at her stunted growth leads her to cleverly kill her own "father", Lestat, by presenting him with children to feed on that have been poisoned with absinthe and laudanum. In his weakened state, she attacks, cutting his throat, biting and draining him.

The character of Claudia could be read as a critique of modern American capitalism. She is the child of Old World money come to the New World (Louis) and early American capitalism (Lestat). Because she is afflicted so young with her vampiric state, just as America remains a relatively young country, she is stunted, unable to grow culturally though her hungers are met and other growths detected. But if we are to take this reading of the story seriously, we have to ask the question of why Anne Rice chose to make Claudia a female rather than a male child?

Rice herself says that Claudia is "the embodiment of my failure to deal with the feminine, a woman trapped in a child's body. She's the person robbed of power" (qtd. in Badley 130). Badley explains "If the male vampire's hard body is powerful and flexible, the female vampire is a living doll – fixed, passive, infantile – an explicitly female metaphor for the horror of embodiment" (130-131).

Yet perhaps a better explanation, whether you buy into the writings of Freud or not, is the idea that "the image of woman speaks castration" (Wolstenholme 8). Claudia is indeed a castrated creature, both because she lacks male organs but also because her female organs are denied her. She is a female eunuch, capable of expressing desire only through orality, through feeding from her victims. Unlike Lestat and Louis who experienced human life and humanly genital passions, Claudia will never know what she is missing. As a critique of modern American

capitalism, one interpretation of this reality is that American culture has never experienced its own true Renaissance, never experienced the sprawling search for identity that European countries did, before becoming a world economic and social leader. Therefore, it can be little more than a consumer, unable to reproduce or express itself in a mature manner and eternally adolescent in its rebellion against the cultures that spawned it.

The least experienced culture becomes the guiding force for a world economy, just as the young (both in human and vampire terms) Claudia inverts the social order of the family Lestat and Louis envision, by destroying the father (revolution) while Louis (the non-British European world) sits passively by, unable to do anything but wait for the outcome of the power struggle.

Luella Miller: The Useless Class

Mary Wilkins Freeman's *Luella Miller*, a short story in her gothic collection, *The Wind in the Rose-Bush*, also examines a power struggle. The tale of Luella Miller, "who had an evil name in the village" (75) is told by a local woman, Lydia Anderson, who describes the horror of a metaphorical vampire. Luella Miller does not actually suck blood, she is not immortal, nor does she exhibit any of the superhuman powers attributed to vampires. Nevertheless, she is an energy vampire who quite literally sucks the life from every person who attempts to care for her.

Luella proves time and again that she is utterly helpless to do anything for herself, and like the traditional vampire is all infant need. Trying to be a schoolteacher before she is married, Luella has one of the older girls in the class, Lottie Henderson do all her teaching for her. Lottie eventually takes ill and dies for no known reason, but "dragged herself to that schoolhouse and helped Luella teach until the last minute" (79). Her husband, sister in law, Aunt Abby, the town Doctor, and a girl from out of town named Sarah Jones, all die one by one after devoting themselves wholly to waiting on Luella. Prior to their deaths each grows weaker and weaker while Luella appears to grow stronger and healthier. Lydia Anderson describes life under Luella's regime for Luella's longsuffering husband, Erastus Miller:

He always got the breakfast and let Luella lay abed. He did all the sweepin' and the washin' and the ironin' and most of the cookin'. He couldn't bear to have Luella lift her finger, and she let him do for her. She lived like a queen for all the work she did. She didn't even do her sewin'. She said it made her shoulder ache to sew, and poor Erastus's sister Lily used to do all her sewin'. She wa'n't able to, either; she was never strong in her back, but she did it beautifully. She had to, to suit Luella, she was so dreadful particular. (81)

Not only is she useless, Luella is also apparently ungrateful and demanding. Her demands are met by the sympathetic souls who care for her until they are finally destroyed by it. After the death of Sarah Jones, when everyone refuses to help her, Luella finally dies and is escorted, according to Lydia Anderson, out of the corporeal world by the ghosts of those she leached from in life. Even after death, Luella proves dangerous. Lydia Anderson, who "continued wonderfully hale and hearty" (103) through her eighty-seventh year, is found dead at the door to Luella's house, after years of service in keeping her story alive. The townspeople, having had enough of this vampirism altogether, burn the house to the ground.

Like many nineteenth and twentieth century American women writers, Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote out of financial necessity and she believed this hampered her ability to write for art's sake. In Virginia L. Blum's article *Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Taste of Necessity*, she explores this further:

In another letter...she explains that she was obliged to support herself as well as others and goes on to confess that 'I do know, and have always known, my accomplished work is not the best work of which I am capable, but it is too late now.'

Artistic preference was for Freeman inescapably modified by financial necessity. (79)

Her struggle for financial survival, and later for financial gain (for Freeman eventually became one of the more successful women writers of her time) must surely have seemed a dire contrast to the "ladies who lunch" of the nineteenth century, a leisure class of women whose husbands were fully able to support them and a house full of servants and nannies that would enable them to essentially never lift a finger. In *Luella Miller*, Freeman creates a caricature of these women, who seem so frail but are actually monsters destroying all the workers who come into contact with them. Her bitterness is obvious, and Freeman herself is reflected in the character of Lydia Anderson who has mixed emotions; she is fascinated and repelled, jealous of and disgusted by Luella Miller's utter uselessness. Ironically, by creating folklore out of her observations of Luella's

life, Lydia covertly serves the interests of the vampiric ingénue by perpetuating her story. Everyone in society, sometimes unwittingly, is working to support this leisure class including the artist, the author, the folklorist, and the bard that sings their song. This is a stinging critique of a declining but still prevalent social class structure that churned out a large, useless upper class of women whose job it was to be beautiful and consume. Certainly, we have not escaped that notion in modern times, although the economy and changing social mores allow far fewer women to live the Luella Miller lifestyle.

Conclusion: The Vampire Mirror

Throughout the history of the vampire story, vampires have been invested with supernatural powers as well as with the power to reflect society and history back to us. They, themselves, traditionally are known to not have reflections, because they are the reflections; they are the extreme inverted double of us, our dark doppelgänger. Immortality only gives them the power to reflect the bigger picture, beyond the mores of a particular generation and location. Twentieth century female vampires, as written by American women writers, frequently contain a subtext of critique on economic issues. This should not be surprising to even the casual observer of the feminist movement in America that at its heart has largely been about economic opportunity. From the right to vote and hold property to penetrating the glass ceiling, from the fight for reproductive freedom to the outcry for equal pay for equal work--American women have had economics very much on their minds and agendas for over two centuries. In The Gilda Stories, Gomez depicts an alternative vision of economic reality that can exist, apparently, only in the underground world of the Other. In Interview with a Vampire, Anne Rice spins a web of metaphor that, intentional or not, gives us a glimpse into the capitalist zeitgeist of America. In *Luella Miller*, Mary Wilkins Freeman critiques a culture that creates a dangerously useless class of infant-minded destroyers. Within the codes of this gothic trope, American women writers subvert Marx's capitalist vampire right under the male gaze, and expose the bloodsucking structures that we live within.

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