

## The Myth of the 20th Century

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### The Vampire Myth



**Haematology**

R W Johnson writing in the journal *New Society* some time ago explained the nuances of the myth of the vampire. He says, in a cultural sense, the 20th century has been the great age of debunking, of secularisation and demythologisation. We not only believe less in gods and superstitions but most of us are less willing to listen to racial mythologies about Jews, Aryans and Blacks; and in large areas of social and private life the old taboos have fallen like sandcastles before the advancing tide of rationalism. We are all agnostics now.

One great exception to this is the vampire myth. To be sure, the myth is hardly a modern creation, but the audience and resonance this myth has achieved in the 20th century has bucked the trend.

In mid-19th century England, a number of attempts were made to exploit the literary and theatrical possibilities of the myth, but apart from Thomas Prest's penny dreadful, *Varney the Vampire or the Feast of Blood* (1847), none of them made much impact. Theatrical attempts to depict vampirism, such as St John Dorset's *The Vampire* (1821) simply never reached the stage. The first stage production seems to have been Reece's *The Vampire* in 1872, but the subject was treated strictly as a joke, and Edward Terry, acting the vampire, was greeted with gales of laughter every time he walked on stage.

The breakthrough came only with Bram Stoker's *Dracula: A Tale*, which first appeared in 1897. Stoker was merely plagiarising from a long and unsuccessful literary tradition, but his success knew no bounds. By 1913 his book was in its tenth edition, and despite the interruption of the first world war, the myth only gathered pace thereafter.

In 1926 we hear of Eleonore Zügun, a 13 year old Rumanian peasant girl brought to London for study. The girl was apparently persecuted by some invisible force which continually left teeth marks on her neck and limbs. Her persecutor was known to the girl only as "Dracu, *anglice* the Devil". Cases such as this caused widespread *frissons*, and in 1927 the first stage production of Stoker's *Dracula* was mounted. First in London, then in the provinces, and finally in New York the play was an awesome success, with women in the audience



**Varney the Vampire, a Penny Dreadful**

fainting in their dozens.

There was no looking back. Sales of Stoker's book doubled and redoubled, and by the 1930s the first vampire films were enjoying a runaway success. Again the interruption of a war made no difference, and in more recent times Hammer Films and a host of imitators have enjoyed extraordinary success with a long series of vampire films. Today, many hundreds of millions of people are thoroughly familiar with all the minutiae of the vampire myth.

## Montague Summers



**Whitby Abbey**

Familiarity with the vampire myth tends to mean familiarity with the Bram Stoker version. There is a tendency to see his work as the *locus classicus*, and even to view Dracula as the quintessential vampire, so that naive but ghoulish tourists set forth every year to visit the castle of Count Vlad in Transylvania, believing they are visiting the true wellspring of vampirism. This is as sensible as viewing old Tarzan films to learn about Africa. Anyone seriously interested in the vampire myth has to start elsewhere, with

the extraordinary two volumes, *The Vampire: his kith and kin* and *The Vampire in Europe*, produced in 1929 by Montague Summers.

Care is needed in reading Summers' work. To some extent it lies within the learned tradition of amateur English anthropology of which Frazer's *The Golden Bough* represents the summit. But Summers was undoubtedly a very strange man—a long vanished, though still legendary, Oxford "character". Although he always used the title, "Reverend", those who knew him swear he was defrocked by the church on suspicion of necromantic practices such as black masses.

He is described as a man of exceptional pallor and extremely sinister bearing, always wearing a black cloak. His books make it clear that he more than half believed in the vampires he studied. "The vampire tradition", he wrote—he always spoke of the tradition, never the myth—"contains far more truth than the ordinary individual cares to appreciate and acknowledge". Summers apparently believed himself to be a vampire.

If you believe in vampires, it follows that they must always have existed and Summers finds traces of them in all ages and places, as long ago as Ancient Greece and as far away as Malaya. Even he, though, admits that "the conception of the vampire proper is peculiar to Slavonic peoples", and the root word is from the old Magyar *vampir*. And while Summers is keen to show that reports of vampirism are rife throughout eastern and central Europe, the area occupied by modern day Hungary and Rumania is the centre of the myth.

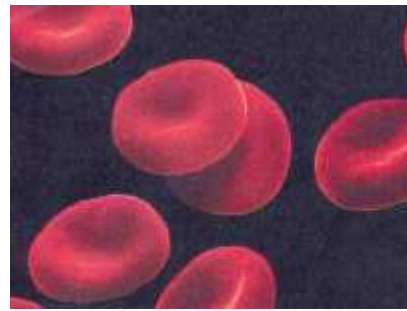
## Origins of the Myth

The myth roughly began in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Up until the 17th century, blood was considered the source of life, as indeed it is in many ways, and its loss through a serious wound, for example, led to death. Anyone's health and character depended on their blood, and old blood could be enfeebled or corrupted by disease causing the person to age. The ancients tried to rejuvenate themselves with young blood. The Pharaohs bathed in it as a cure for leprosy. Even popes were vampirish. Pope Innocent VIII, in 1492, drank the blood of three young men to ward off death. He failed. William Harvey, in 1628,

discovered that the blood circulated in a closed system, and ideas of consuming blood or bathing in it as a cure were realised as ineffective. However the idea of blood transfusions now arose and Richard Lower of Oxford transfused blood between dogs in 1665, causing Samuel Pepys to jest:

This did give occasion to many pretty wishes, as of the blood of a Quaker to be let into an archbishop and such like.

Perhaps Dr Lower took him seriously for he introduced a patient to the Royal Society to undergo a blood transfusion in 1667. The patient was a 22 year old clergyman whose blood was considered too hot for a man of his profession! A sheep, being calm and docile, was considered the ideal donor, and Lower transfused half a pint into the reverend. Pepys wrote:



**Red Blood Corpuscles**

I was pleased to see the parson who had his blood taken out. He finds himself much better since, and as a new man, but he is cracked a little in the head.

A minor flood of scholarly works on vampirism, mainly by Germans, appeared in the early 1730s. In them the vampire myth appears for the first time in more or less its full modern form—the vampire is not a ghost or demon but is a real human who is “un-dead”, whose body will not decompose while it can feed itself on human blood, and whose victims quickly become listless and die soon thereafter, sometimes admitting on their death bed how their fate befell them.

A further help in dating the myth derives from the fact that, in 1738, Cardinal Schrattenbach, Bishop of Olmütz, wrote in some panic to the Pope that his diocese was afflicted by a terrifying outbreak of vampirism. The Pope sent a special legate, Archbishop Davanzati, to report. Davanzati’s report—in many ways the real authority on the subject—reveals that though he was an exceptionally learned man, he had never heard of the myth before his mission.

The very first report of vampirism had actually occurred in the Hungary of the 1680s, spreading outwards towards the surrounding countries in the following decades. Only when reports began to come from “civilised” Germany did the Vatican really sit up. In the 1740s the myth had its first real impact on the west with many scholarly works on the subject yielding earnest instructions on how to dispose of the fiend—a stake through the heart, burning, cutting off the head and tearing out its heart. The first allusion in English comes from *The Travels of Three English Gentlemen* (1745), and the term quickly passed into popular use.

## Reasons for the Myth

Why should the myth have crystallised in the form it did in late 17th century Hungary? One can suggest three possible strands of explanation.

First, in all Europe this was the area where the pattern of land holding was most unequal, and where the aristocracy was most notorious for the rapacity and ruthlessness with which it batted on its serf and peasant population. The vampire is usually a count or countess. The oppressed Transylvanian peasantry were apparently anticipating Marx’s metaphor of the bourgeoisie sucking the blood of the unfortunates beneath.

Second, this was—plainly still is—a particularly troubled, violent, and terrifying part of the world in which to live. Incidents of indescribable cruelty abound both domestically and in the continuous wars of the period. The area was haunted by the terrible fear of the Turk, the faceless, ruthless foe to whom, like the vampire, the cross was an intolerable affront. Nowadays, any Moslem will do!

Third, by this time tales had perhaps begun to drift back of the vampire bats found in the New World.

Whatever its precise origins, the amazing rapidity with which the myth spread is indisputable. For Magyar folk panics to travel right across Europe and produce a new word and a new mythology even in England, in the space of 60 years, was no mean testament to the shocking power of the myth. Then, as now, the sexual and religious implications of the myth, as well as its sheer horror, meant that it struck a deep note everywhere.

The myth first entered a barely-acknowledged literary underworld, cropping up mainly in penny dreadfuls and unrespectable gothic novels. Dumas and Byron both wrote on the theme but such works did nothing for their reputations. The bottomless horror of vampirism had to be nameless, not a topic which the polite world of respectable literary society could really acknowledge. The audience for literary works on vampirism was left to the plebs. Even in the world of low brow theatre, plays about vampirism were often burlesques, as if the myth was too horrible and terrifying to be treated seriously.



**Vampire Food**

## Alienation



**Vampire Bones?**

So, Bram Stoker was simply lucky. The first stage of demystification is to bring a subject out into the full serious light. Stoker wrote a "serious" tragedy about vampires, and the 20th century, which demythologises everything, was ready to begin the long process of accepting—and thus defusing—the most powerful subterranean myth of all. By the 1970s and 1980s we got round to really funny films about vampires—not burlesques, which refuse to take the myth seriously, but comedies which accept the myth head on, and still laugh at it. Stoker was the man who brought the myth to the surface of the real literary world and caught the wave, while Polanski's comic film treatment of vampirism should really be set next to *The Life of Brian*, a satire on an equally powerful myth, that of

Christianity.

The 20th century has brought great crises of social and personal identity, of alienation and *anomie* on a quite new scale. It has pushed the exploration of the material world into conceptions of negative particles, of antimatter, of black holes. The vampire fits well into such a world.



He is human antimatter. He lives only by killing. He doesn't eat and he hates garlic as no person truly alive does. Water, crucial to human life, is anathema to him, as is the cross, the symbol of life for Christians. He has no identity—he can't even be seen in a mirror. He cannot stand daylight, crucial to all life. He doesn't have sex—or rather, for him the sexual act is always a violent rape which brings forth not another life but another death. He is immune to bullets, cannot stand holy water, and can pass through solid objects. He does not even die, as a man does—he is un-dead.

He is a pure inversion of life. There is no *anomie*, no alienation, as great, as the vampire's. He is the alienation of man, and that alienation is potentially immortal. He is ultimately exploitative—a spreading centre of alienation, despoiling others of their very lives and identities too.

There is no doubt that there is, much here that echoes our peculiar age, with its strange mixture of scientific advance into the very boundaries of the surreal, its horrors of self-annihilation and super exploitation, its terrible, lasting sadnesses. The late 20th century is the true age of the vampire.

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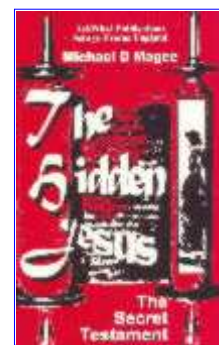
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