DOI: 10.47743/aic-2022-1-0008

AIC
nr. 29
1/2022
©2022 AIC

The Vampiric Mother in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire”

FLORINA NĂSTASE
Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași
fnastase60@yahoo.com;
fnastase8@gmail.com

Keywords

Sherlock Holmes; vampire; motherhood; postcolonialism; abjection; Gothic.

The current paper intends to discuss the figure of the ‘vampiric’ mother in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes story, “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire”, in which a young woman is suspected and accused of sucking the blood of her young infant. When Holmes is sent to investigate, he discovers that the mother is innocent of the charge and was, in fact, only trying to protect her baby, but the horror and abjection of the mother figure devouring her child supersedes the horror of the vampire. The paper argues that motherhood equals, multiplies and even replaces the monstrosity of the vampire. In spite of the mother’s ultimate innocence, her status as foreigner and Other (both female and Peruvian) marks her as an indeterminate threat. In order to explain the marginality and peril of the foreign mother, the paper will also turn to postcolonial theories, relating them to theories of gender, race and motherhood.

The vampire as a cultural figure has always encapsulated the anxieties of his age, mirroring not only human concerns, but the human being itself (Groom, 2018: 13). The construction of the vampire has been “profoundly shadowed by changes in the definition of the human” (13). As such, the history of the vampire is the history of the human, of trying to understand the human being, the vampire being a useful “tool” in such endeavors (13).

As a cultural export, the vampire has usually traveled east to west. Interestingly, in Eastern European folklore, where the myth originated, the creature was not so much supernatural as an “extreme natural phenomenon” (72), a flesh-and-blood reality that also consumed flesh and blood. The vampire could be catalogued as a diseased body that was contagious to others, much like its counterpart, the bat (72). The belief in its tangible corporality was due to the corroborated cases of corpses rising from their graves in certain parts of the Balkans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (73-74). On the threshold of the Enlightenment, such disturbing occurrences provided opportunities for scientific and forensic investigations of the body, and empirical methods such as the post-mortem became less controversial in time (74). But the ‘vampire’s spread across Europe culminated in the nineteenth century, when, having landed on western shores, he became a Gothic and Romantic symbol, in part due to the “necrophiliac imagination of the period” (139). Writers and artists were experimenting with the limits of imagination, while also inserting more subjectivity in their works. The vampires of John William Polidori and Lord Byron, for example, were “dandy” gentlemen who mirrored their creators (Williamson, 2003: 102). There was a newfound proximity between human and vampire. Most of the literary vampires of the period, as Nina Auerbach puts it, "were indeterminate creatures who flourished not in their difference from their human prey, but through their intimate intercourse with mortals, to whom they were dangerously close (1997: 13).

Teetering between sublimity and abjection, desire and repulsion, the vampire was a temptation that disturbed notions of selfhood. Connecting questions of identity and monstrosity (who or what is the monster?), he was a reminder of the perpetuity of the past, haunting the present (Groom, 2018: 139-140), but he was also a herald of the future. The Romantic Age responded eagerly to the fantastic aspect of the vampire, yet the creature still exercised a scientific fascination, both as a medical and natural mystery, particularly because the nineteenth century had upended many religious and philosophical certainties regarding (human) nature (140). The vampire gained reality, while reality itself lost credibility. This is why Bram Stoker's *Dracula* makes the infamous Count seem like a believable entity, taking part in the culture and economy of English society. The novel unites various fields of crime, forensics, and medicine, while also rooting the creature in a Gothic tradition; Dracula is both mythological and social, he is the culmination of the century's preoccupation with science, money, degeneracy, illness, sexuality, and identity (206).

That being said, the vampire as a category becomes far more diffuse when the modifier "female" is attached before it. A female vampire poses slightly different questions. What is a female predator? What sort of danger does she present? What is her allure? Nineteenth-century literature was rife with female vampires, as they, in fact, predominated in number (175). To the Romantics, the 'vampiress' was a seductress of men whose lethal charm led to their downfall, even when she had no direct hand in it. Edgar Allan Poe's gothic universe, for example, includes many dead or dying childlike brides who drain the lives of others (Holte, 1999: 164). But the nineteenth-century female vampire, first and foremost, threatened the wholeness and purity of the institutions associated with woman, such as marriage and virginity (Groom, 2018: 175). Though she partook in the seduction of men, the female vampire was a bigger menace to the innocence of young women through the power of corruption and contamination. Both Lady Geraldine in Coleridge's *Christabel* and Carmilla in Sheridan Le Fanu's eponymous novel tempt young women to stray from their path and become fallen women, like them. Christabel even utters a desperate "Mary mother, save me now!" (2006: 20), invoking the name of another female immortal at the sight of the beautiful Geraldine, but she still disrobes and joins the strange lady in bed. Similarly, Laura first feels Carmilla's sting in her bedroom, on her breast:

> She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. The lady started back, with her eyes fixed on me, and then slipped down upon the floor, and, as I thought, hid herself under the bed. (Le Fanu, 2020: 9)

Carmilla's infiltration of the young woman's bed is disturbing because it is gentle and "soothing", combining sisterly and motherly attention with consumption, the breast acting as a metonym for both innocence and carnality. Indeed, Carmilla is both "adorable and abhorrent" (Groom, 2018: 182). The female vampire's form of seduction combines virginity and sexuality in a much yearned for and unachievable fantasy. Keats' *Lamia*, for example, seems both the "penanced lady elf" and "the demon's self" (1998: 194).

Keats was inspired by one of the female vampire's first mythological sources, the lamia, the other being the Biblical Lilith. Both Lilith and Lamia have serpentine qualities and are connected to the figure of the serpent. Lilith, as the first wife of Adam in the Apocryphal Judeo-Christian texts, took the form of a snake, at Satan's behest, in order to tempt Eve, Adam's second wife (Brode, 2014: 4). Lamia's lower half, on the other hand, would take on a serpentine appearance during her seduction of men. In Greek mythology, Lamia, Queen of Lybia, had an affair with Zeus, for which she was punished by Hera, who destroyed any child of hers, driving Lamia to madness and despair. Her vengeance was fulfilled in the devouring of both children and men, and her appearance became monstrous and snake-like. Zeus endowed her with powers of transformation and prophecy, not out of pity, but because Lamia's attraction lay in her vengeful trap; men were drawn to her destructive lovemaking, out of a desire to "fall" (2). The shadowy figures of Lilith and Lamia were, therefore, early incarnations of "female vampire as the natural enemy of domesticity, sought by the patriarch for her forbidden allure, likely to 'swallow up' any man whole" (2).

If the female vampire is more snake-like, so is her bite. In old religions, the snake's ability to encircle its tail led some cultures to associate it with the moon and further connect it with the female and the menstrual cycle (4). As such, the punctures left by a female vampire remind one of the snake, rather than the bat (4). The correlations made between menstrual blood, the serpentine 'vampiress' and the Biblical temptation to "fall" are not incidental: women have always been marked as more sinful and 'monstrous' by their very nature, as they are "formed in the image of the vampire" (Groom, 2018: 187). By this logic, not all men could be vampires, but all women have the demonic potential inside them. Particularly in the nineteenth century, when the figure of the vampire reached new heights, the image of woman was often likened to a beast, be it cat or snake (187). Thus, while male vampires were viewed as "roving thought-experiments lingering on the periphery of comprehension" (13), female vampires embodied a periphery of miscomprehension, where the modifier "female" was just as monstrous as "vampire".

What is noteworthy about the figure of Lamia (and its later literary counterpart, Medea, who, incidentally, was often portrayed as priestess to the serpent-like Hecate, patron goddess over the moon and witchcraft) is not only her sexual dominance over men, but her drive to destroy and devour children. It is the relationship between the female vampire and the child that will concern the rest of this paper in the analysis of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story, "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" (1924).

In the "Sussex Vampire", the already well-established detective is assigned to solve a case whose explanation seems to be supernatural. Holmes receives a letter about an extremely bizarre family situation where a young mother has been witnessed sucking the blood of her young infant. The letter describes one such scene: "A loud cry from the baby, as of pain, called the nurse back. As she ran into the room she saw her employer, the lady, leaning over the baby, and apparently biting his neck. There was a small wound in the neck, from which a stream of blood had escaped" (Doyle, 2016: 259). The nurse is "horrified" and so is the young woman's husband who, though at first rejecting the possibility, witnesses his wife's deviant behavior firsthand: "With a cry of horror, he turned his wife's face to the light and saw blood all around her lips. It was she – she beyond all question – who had drunk the poor baby's blood" (260).

Though the case seems rather disturbing, Holmes finds it more ridiculous than strange, especially when the notion of "vampirism" is brought up. The detective is quite amused by the letter, telling Dr. Watson: "For a mixture of the modern and the medieval, of the practical and of the wildly fanciful, I think this is surely the limit" (255). Through Sherlock Holmes, Doyle is both critiquing and mocking the sensationalist literature of the late Victorian and Edwardian period that was fascinated by the figure of the vampire. Holmes, as the reasoning detective, must unmask the ruse, using his science of deduction. Yet, Holmes also appears to be irritated that he has to lend his skills to such "supernatural" tall-tales: "but really we seem to have been switched on to a Grimms' fairy tale" (256). It is not just the case itself, but the infiltration of a whole other genre upon the detective story that leaves Holmes feeling "displaced" (Smajic, 2010: 3) because the supernatural is not supposed to "insinuate itself" into a story about logic and reason (3). Holmes's exclamation of "Rubbish, Watson, rubbish!" (Doyle, 2016: 257) comes at the beginning of the story, already informing the reader that he should not expect Holmes to be wrong in this assertion. Indeed, the detective underlines that "the world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply" (257). And yet, the true horror of the case does not stem from a supernatural component; after all, a woman does not need to be a literal vampire to bite her child and suck its blood. In fact, that is precisely the problem and the solution to the story: the woman is indeed only mortal and has good reasons for trying to suck her infant's blood, but until we are told those reasons at the end of the story, the source of disturbance remains the image of the mother's lips, red with her child's blood.

In his letter to Holmes, Robert Ferguson, the beleaguered husband, confesses that he knows little of "Vampirism" and that he thought "it was some wild tale of foreign parts" (260). Indeed, when Holmes looks through his famous index of cases, the entry for "vampire" leads him to Hungary and Transylvania (256). Such supernatural occurrences have no place on English soil, or at least, they should only appear in fanciful stories. Much like in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, it is the *location* of the vampire that is unsettling; the fact that such a "foreign" creature may be found in the heart of London is almost as disturbing as its existence. Dracula's infiltration of the city through the purchase of houses with the goal of spreading vampirism is seen by Stephen Arata as a form of "reverse colonization", where "the 'civilized' world is on the point of being overrun by 'primitive forces" (1996: 108). Likewise, the presence of a vampire in the traditionally English county of Sussex strikes one as both eerie and absurd. London, at least, is a multinational metropolis, the hub of the Empire, but Sussex is not the usual setting for a Gothic tale. Indeed, Mr. Ferguson writes in his letter, almost overcome with disbelief: "And yet here in the very heart of the English Sussex –" (Doyle, 2016: 260). Doyle's choice of location hints at the ridiculousness of such a possibility and reinforces Holmes' perspective on the matter.

Ironically, vampirism is less foreign to England than Ferguson's wife who is a "Peruvian lady, the daughter of a Peruvian merchant" that the husband had met "in connection with the importation of nitrates" (258). Ferguson procured his wife as part of his commercial relations with South America. Here one may dwell on the mention of "nitrates" which are usually found in fertilizers, and the ironic echo of Dracula's boxes full of native soil. Yet of more interest is the fact that Mr. Ferguson has a difficult time relating to his strange, foreign wife:

> The lady was very beautiful, but the fact of her foreign birth and of her alien religion always caused a separation of interests and of feelings between husband and wife, so that after a time his love may have cooled towards her and he may have come to regard their

> union as a mistake. He felt there were sides of her character which he could never explore of understand. This was the more painful, as she was as loving a wife as a man could have – to all appearance absolutely devoted. (258)

In spite of the wife's loving behavior, her husband feels there is something about her that escapes comprehension, a distance that cannot be bridged. Indeed, even at the story's conclusion, when the lady is absolved of her crime, we may wonder if her "foreign birth" and her "alien religion" will maintain that separation. Ferguson's wife is doubly strange, being both a foreigner and a woman. When her husband reflects: "And yet, the kiddies have got to be protected. Is it madness, Mr. Holmes? Is it something in the blood?" (262), he is considering both race and gender. Madness or hysteria was often the diagnostic given to a deviant female constitution and the Sussex vampiress is locked up in her room in a similar fashion to the female patient in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). At the same time, her possibly 'tainted' blood is related to her foreign origins. When asked if his wife has a jealous nature, Ferguson replies "jealous with all the strength of her fiery tropical love" (265) which hints at her disease (vampirism) being related to her South American ethnicity.

South American "utensils and weapons" also hang on the walls of Ferguson's old farmhouse, having been brought over "by the Peruvian lady upstairs" (267). This implicates the mother in the crime, in spite of her innocence. Holmes ultimately reveals to the husband that his wife had been trying to save their baby by sucking poison from his neck. It turns out that Ferguson's son from his previous marriage had been trying to poison the baby out of jealousy, and the instrument he used was one of the South American "utensils" on display (namely, a poisoned arrow). Therefore, despite her honorable intentions, the foreign mother is still linked with the means of killing. It was an English boy who tries to harm the child, but it was she who brought the poisoned arrow in the household.

The lasting threat that the wife represents, in spite of her innocence, speaks to the constant anxiety in late Victorianism due to "England's increasingly intimate contact with the peoples and cultures on the peripheries of the Empire" (Harris, 2003: 448). Such people were believed to have "potentially harmful effects on metropolitan culture" (448). Sherlock Holmes was meant to assuage their fears, using his authority not only to debunk the myth of vampirism, but to also carefully defuse the potentially dangerous foreigner. Though accompanied by Dr. Watson, Holmes' actions parallel that of a doctor "in that he diagnoses, contains, and neutralizes the noxious agents he investigates" (447), be them substances or people. Ferguson's wife, though ultimately good, cannot be entirely neutralized. She cannot get rid of her Otherness and, ultimately, cannot remove the shadow of the vampire, either. When her husband first arrives to see Holmes in Baker Street, his old friend Watson can barely recognize him because he looks weakened and drained: "There is surely nothing in life more painful than to meet the wreck of a fine athlete whom one has known in his prime. His great frame had fallen in, his flaxen hair was scanty, and his shoulders were bowed" (Doyle, 2016: 262). We can infer that his wife is depleting him of life, sucking out his strength and vigor, as a vampire would. The Irish-Scottish family name of "Ferguson" comes from the Old Irish roots of "fer" (man) and "guss" (vigor, strength, force). Thus, "Ferguson" literally means 'the son of the man of strength'. Mrs. Ferguson is endangering that male strength and vigor; she is a vampiric creature on the "periphery of Empire", draining it of its might.

If we return for a moment to the concept of "reverse colonization" observed by Stephen Arata in *Dracula* and apply it here, we may notice a difference in agency; Dracula's infiltration is intentional, but Ferguson's wife does not mean to corrupt and overturn the hierarchy, she simply wants to be a dutiful, loving wife. That is why she does not tell her husband about his son's guilt, because she is willing to sacrifice herself "rather than break his dear heart" (270). As a mother, Ferguson's wife is a more disturbing 'vampire', because her infiltration is much more intimate and passive. She seduces through her nurturing and loving behavior, she drains the vigor of manhood through her motherly sacrifices.

Motherhood has always been rife with contradictions and complications. The birthing act is both repulsive and sublime, and there is a certain supernatural liminality about the state of the fetus as it passes "from inside to outside, bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces" (Creed, 2007: 190). Though the mother gives new life, she forever conditions her creation to yearn for the womb and the pre-human; as Julia Kristeva writes, the maternal is a "matrix space, nourishing, unnameable, anterior to the One, to God, and, consequently defying metaphysics" (1981: 16). The vampiric mother is then almost a tautology; the mother as vampire is only a repetition and a reinforcement of the contaminating monster – she who is "anterior to the One, to God".

The nameless and "unnameable" mother in the Holmesian story remains vampiric through her child, as well. She has given birth to an infant who, though an English subject, has managed to combine the best features of both 'races', as we are told that he is "a beautiful child, dark-eyed, golden-haired, a wonderful mixture of the Saxon and the Latin" (Doyle, 2016: 271). The child has borrowed his mother's uncanny essence, but he will manage to infiltrate better, seeing as he has assimilated both the human and 'Other'. It is interesting to note Dr. Watson's observation at the beginning of the story, when he brings up the custom of drinking blood for vitality: "'But surely, said I, 'the vampire was not necessarily a dead man? A living person might have the habit. I have read, for example, of the old sucking the blood of the young in order to retain their youth'" (257). In that sense, we may wonder who is drinking whom. The mother was willing to sacrifice herself, not only for her half-English child, but for her husband and his older son as well; meanwhile, it is the "old", or rather, the English who are sucking the blood of the younger nations on the periphery in order to keep the Empire alive. The Empire itself is then a vampiric mother, draining and being drained by its satellites.

There is something particularly disturbing about a woman's embrace turning out to be lethal. Edvard Munch's painting *Love and Pain* (1983-95) shows a woman kissing and embracing a man while her vividly red hair spills over his body, and there are hints in the woman's powerful stance that she is not merely doting on the man, but something more sinister is afoot (Groom, 2018: 41). The maternal figure goes hand in hand with the vampire, the succubus, the giver and taker of life. The monstrosity of the vampiric mother lies in her nurturing womanhood, which is both a weapon and a form of grace.

This paper has attempted to show how the vampiric mother disturbs, multiplies and even replaces the monstrosity of the supernatural, particularly in the shape of a racial and ethnic Other. The threat of the vampire's infiltration and domination at the end of the nineteenth century finds echo in Arthur Conan Doyle's story. Though Sherlock Holmes mocks and minimizes this threat for the sake of its audience, the "Sussex vampire" remains a disturbing agent in Ferguson's household, as his Peruvian wife will continue, in her alterity and Otherness, to exercise a certain vampiric power over him and his children.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

ARATA, Stephen (1996). *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

AUERBACH, Nina (1997). *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

BRODE, Douglas (2014). Introduction: "Lamia and Lilith LIVE!" (or at least are Undead). In Douglas BRODE & Leah DEYNEKA (eds.), *Dracula's Daughters: The Female Vampire on Film* (pp. 1-21). Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc.

COLERIDGE, Samuel Taylor (2006). *Poems selected by James Fenton*. London: Faber and Faber.

CREED, Barbara (2007). *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London & New York: Routledge.

DOYLE, Arthur Conan (2016). *Sherlock Holmes: The Dark Mysteries*. London: Macmillan Collector's Library.

GROOM, Nick (2018). *The Vampire: A New History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

HARRIS, Susan C. (2003). Pathological Possibilities: Contagion and Empire in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Stories. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *31*, *2*, 447-466. Available online: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25058636 [Accessed on April 3, 2022].

HOLTE, James C. (1999). Not All Fangs Are Phallic: Female Film Vampires. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *10*, *2(38)*, 163-173. Available online: http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308382 [Accessed on April 3, 2022].

KEATS, John (1998). *Selected Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

KRISTEVA, Julia (1981). Women's Time. Translated by Alice JARDINE & Harry BLAKE. *Signs*, *7*, *1*, 13-35. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173503 [Accessed on May 17, 2022].

LE FANU, Sheridan (2020). *Carmilla*. London: Pushkin Press.

SMAJIC, Srdjan (2010). *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

WILLIAMSON, Milly (2003). Vampire Transformations: From Gothic Demon to Domestication? In Carla T. KUNGL (ed.), *Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (pp. 101-109). Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press.