The Question of Immortality: Vampires, Count Dracula, and Vlad the Impaler

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What constitutes immortality? There are essentially two definitions: first, “endless life, the condition of living forever, of never dying”; and secondly, “fame that is likely to last forever.” When applied to the three entities that are the subject of this paper – the vampire, the Count Dracula of Bram Stoker’s novel, and the historical personage whose nickname “Dracula” Stoker borrowed – both definitions raise problematic issues.

Immortality is often cited as one of the chief characteristics of the vampire. Indeed, today it can account to a great extent for the tremendous appeal of the vampire in western popular culture, not only fulfilling (albeit in a fictional universe) the human yearning for eternal life, but filling a void created by skepticism about and even abandonment of traditional religious faith. Furthermore, for many, the lure of the vampire lies in the ideal of eternal youth. But these paradigms are more of a modern (or even post-modern) construct than an essential part of either folklore or traditional vampire literature.

In his Motif Index of Folk Literature, Stith Thompson defines a vampire as a “corpse which comes from the grave at night and sucks blood” in order to sustain its existence (2:424). It has its origins in the folk legends of many countries, most specifically in central and eastern Europe. Most folklorists agree that the word “vampire” has Slavic roots, first appearing as a proper name (“Upir”) in a Russian manuscript of the eleventh century and as a generic term in a Serbian manuscript two hundred years later. The form “vampir” has been found in a fifteenth-century South Slavic source. Vampire-like creatures (by other names) have been identified in the myth and lore of many other cultures.

What is significant in Thompson’s definition for our purposes is that a vampire is a corpse; that is, it is already dead. Immortality, in the sense of our earlier definition as a state of “endless life” or “never dying” hardly applies. Another common element found in much of the folklore is that a person becomes a vampire after death as a result of some condition or set of circumstances present during his lifetime. Some are predisposed at birth: those born on certain holy days, or on the new moon; those born with a defect such as a caul, an extra nipple, or teeth; anyone who is the seventh son of a seventh son. Others are doomed to return as vampires because of transgressions committed against acceptable codes of behavior during their lifetime, such as practising sorcery or engaging in acts of violence. Still others return from the dead because of the circumstances surrounding their death or burial: they died without baptism, they died in a state of excommunication, they committed suicide, they were in life attacked by another vampire, or their bodies were not buried in accordance with proper rituals. But in each case, the vampire is clearly dead.

Furthermore, vampire lore frequently indicates that the vampire can be destroyed – that its existence can be brought to an end by outside intervention. The most widespread was to drive a wooden stake through its heart; other techniques included decapitation, drenching the body in garlic or holy water, extracting and burning the heart, or burning the entire corpse. Paradoxically, then, immortality for the vampire is a temporary state dependent on its ability to procure an adequate blood supply and its deftness in avoiding the instruments of destruction.
The folkloric vampire entered Western literature as a result of the convergence of two factors: the famous vampire sightings of the eighteenth century, and the rise of Gothic literature. In neither of these is the trait of immortality a prominent feature.

The word “vampyre” made its first appearance in the English language in the early 1730s. The occasion was a rash of vampire sightings documented in several parts of central and eastern Europe and eventually reported in the British press. These were so widespread that in some countries government officials became directly involved. So did the academic community. In 1746, French Biblical scholar Dom Augustin Calmet wrote a treatise on the subject, including his account of the famous case of Arnald Paul. These reports coincided with (and maybe contributed to) a rising interest in Gothic literature, first in Germany and later (during the last decades of the eighteenth century) in England. The Gothic movement was part of the broader period of Romanticism, with its challenge to rationalism and its shift of philosophical emphasis to subjectivity, emotion, intuition and imagination. It was inevitable that the vampire would be adopted by Gothic writers. The first in English literature to do so were the Romantic poets, notably Robert Southey and Lord Byron. Southey included a vampire in *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1799), while Byron’s narrative poem *The Giaour* (1813) contains this famous vampire curse:

But first on earth, as Vampire sent,
Thy corpse shall from its tomb be rent;
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
And suck the blood of all thy race;
There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
At midnight drain the stream of life;
Yet loathe the banquet, which perforce
Must feed thy livid, living corpse,
Thy victims, ere they yet expire,
Shall know the demon for their sire;
As cursing thee, thou cursing them,
Thy flowers are withered on the stem.

Again, the emphasis is on the folkloric traits: the corpse and its need for blood. Even though the image of the vampire became more romanticized and eroticized during the nineteenth century with literary works such as “The Vampyre” by John Polidori, *Varney the Vampyre* by James Malcolm Rymer and “Carmilla” by Le Fanu, the issue of immortality is never a central one.

This brings us to Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* (1897) which became the template for all future representations of the vampire, whether through conformity or deviation. Stoker coins the term “un-dead” as a synonym for his concept of the vampire. The word appears several times throughout the novel, on each occasion used either by Van Helsing or in reference to what he has said. Stoker was obviously very fond of the word, and had even considered it as the title of the novel. Even though he had found the name “Dracula” as early as 1890 and had been using it in notes and outlines, not until very late in the process did he select it as the title. The title appearing on the California typescript is “THE UN-DEAD By Bram Stoker” with “Copyright 1897”. Furthermore, the dramatic reading, undertaken on 18 May 1897, prior to publication of the novel, was entitled “Dracula; or, the Un-Dead.”

The term “un-dead” is used by Stoker to express the existence of the vampire in a sort of “no-man’s land” – dead, but yet not dead. Unlike the ghost, the vampire appears in an animated body, a body which performs at least some of the functions of the living. But how immortal is this “un-dead”? In outlining the powers and limitations of the vampire, Abraham Van Helsing states, “When they become such, there come with the change the curse of immortality; they cannot die but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world” (308). This, of course, is nonsense. What we are seeing here is yet another example of the numerous
inconsistencies that plague Stoker’s novel (and which, in fact, add to its complexities). The vampire can indeed die -- as Van Helsing demonstrated clearly himself in the staking of Lucy and later in the pursuit of Dracula. Later, the Dutch professor amends his original declaration, pointing out that “The vampire live on, and cannot die by mere passing of the time” (335). That’s better.

What of this “curse of immortality”? It is rooted in the concept that for Stoker, the vampire is a “foul thing for all eternity” (311), evil incarnate. The Count’s powers (including his potential for immortality) were bestowed on him by Satan himself. There are several occurrences throughout the novel of a distinction between the “un-dead” and the “true dead.” The former is a state of damnation, while the latter reflects eternal rest with God. This brings us to the nub of the issue of immortality in Stoker’s novel, a concept that can be only understood with reference to the essentially Christian framework of the text. Given the frequency of biblical and Christian allusions throughout the text, one can read the entire novel as a reaffirmation of Christian faith. Thus the “curse of immortality” mentioned by Van Helsing is rooted in the concept that the vampire is, to use another of the professor’s phrases “a foul thing” whose powers are bestowed by Satan himself. Such immortality is ill-gained, in contrast with the immortality offered through faith in Christ. Through the redemptive power of faith and prayer, the vampire Lucy will be restored to true death and subsequent immortality: “But the most blessed of all,” says Van Helsing, “when this now Un-dead be made to rest as true dead, then the soul of the poor lady whom we love shall again be free … [and] she shall take her place with the other angels” (309). Or after her staking, “No longer she is the devil’s Un-Dead. She is God’s true dead, whose soul is with him” (311). Mina, whose Christian charity exceeds that of all the others, even suggests this possibility for Dracula himself: “Just think what will be his joy when he too is destroyed in his worser part that his better part may have spiritual immortality” (423).

What of the second definition of immortality provided at the outset: “fame that is likely to live forever”? Nobody can deny that Stoker’s Dracula (and through him, the vampire itself) has achieved that status. Though a fictional character, Count Dracula’s name evokes instant and universal recognition, arguably second to none in the Western world. The image of the Count is ubiquitous: from late-night horror movies to the stages of some of the world’s most prestigious ballet companies. As for the novel itself, it continues to be reissued in new editions, makes frequent appearances on the curricula of university courses, and offers challenges to researchers and scholars around the world. There appears to be no end in sight.

Now we move to a historical figure and find an even greater complexity. The incessant linking of Vlad the Impaler with Stoker’s vampire Count has beleaguered Dracula studies for the past thirty years has made it virtually impossible to separate fact from fiction. This takes two forms: the associating of Vlad with vampires and vampire legends, and the false assumption that Bram Stoker deliberately modeled his Count Dracula on Vlad. I propose to focus on the former – the vampirization of Vlad. As for the latter. I refer you to my book Dracula: Sense & Nonsense, in which I systematically challenge much current thinking about the relationship between Stoker’s Dracula and Vlad.

In 1996, a television documentary ironically entitled “Vampires: Thirst for the Truth”, produced in the United States for The Learning Channel, included this preposterous statement, casually tossed out as fact: that Stoker “discovered the name of a real person connected to vampire legend, Prince Dracula of Transylvania, better known as Vlad the Impaler.” We might laugh, were it not for the lamentable reality that such a view is widespread. Consider the following statements, all published within the last 10 years: that “Almost all literary, television and movie vampires are modelled after one historical figure ... Vlad the Impaler” (Hillyer 78); that “Stoker was the first to have had the genius – or courage – to write about Dracula as a vampire” (Beecher Smith 27); that the people of Wallachia “fear[ed] that the vampire Dracula would come back” (Daly 23); that “When questioned about current beliefs, peasants living in the region around Castle Dracula [Poenari] revealed that there is no longer a connection between Vlad Tepes and the vampire in their folklore” (McNally & Florescu, Search 1994, 123; emphasis mine); “The picture which
Eastern European people had of the vampire was based to a great extent on ... Vlad Dracula.... Much closer come the many stories that circulated after the death of Vlad. People began to see him as the great leader of the vampires” (Brederoo 272-73); “Dracula was based on vampire legends that probably arose from hundreds of savage murders committed in the 1400s by Vlad Tepes” (World Book Encyclopedia 1998, 5:317). Little wonder so many people are convinced. (I might add that building a vampire theme park near the birthplace of Vlad will serve to perpetuate such nonsense.)

As early as 1973, Florescu and McNally in Dracula: A Biography of Vlad the Impaler, provided this explanation as to why the myth presumably developed: “Vampire symbolism became attached to Dracula essentially because his real life lent itself to being mythologized in that way. Dracula’s thirst for blood was well known, as was his fixation on impalement” (162). And later, “The evil that existed within his family also contributes to the myth [of the vampire]. The discovery of his brother, Mircea, turned head downward in his tomb, rather than upward, once again helped perpetrate the vampire lore in Dracula’s family ...” (172). The nasty rumors started to spread. In 1985, Leatherdale expands on the “tacit associations”: [Vlad’s] chosen method of execution – impalement – happened to be the same as that recommended for vampires; Tepes was eventually decapitated in the manner of accused vampires; and his alleged resting place in Snagov was itself opened up and pillaged – suggestive that he had risen up. Stoker may even have learned of the legend that Tepes never really died, but was waiting to rise up and protect his homeland if threatened: he was, in other words, lying in wait – ‘undead’” (98). Dozens have since jumped on the bandwagon, with ludicrous results: for example, the preposterous claim that Vlad’s vampirism originated with the Orthodox Church which, because of his conversion to Catholicism, “cursed him to wander the earth forever as a vampire” (Hillyer 78).

But even if Vlad were not a vampire, we are told, surely his bloodthirstiness was what inspired Stoker to use his nickname “Dracula” for his vampire Count? The assumption here is that Stoker knew of Vlad’s atrocities. There is not the slightest bit of evidence to prove such knowledge, either in Stoker’s sources, his Notes or the novel itself. Not deterred, some have taken the position that while Vlad was of course not a vampire, the term technically applies, because he was a blood-drinker. Such creative mythmaking was in evidence as early as 1971, when Donald Glut made the sensational statement that Dracula was a real person “who drank human blood” (True Vampires 39; emphasis his). He was apparently hoodwinked by an interview (from which he quotes) that had appeared in the March 1968 issue of Fate, in which a certain Count Alexander Cepesi, who claimed to be a descendant of Vlad, stated that his infamous ancestor collected the blood of his victims and drank it “either straight or blended with alcohol and brewed with herbs of his liking” (qtd in Glut, Dracula Book 10). As if that were not enough, this Count went on to state that after his death Vlad was seen riding through the mountains of Transylvania “showing his sharp white teeth and demanding human blood” (10). To his credit, however, Glut soon became skeptical; in 1972 he wisely labelled the Count’s comments “of questionable authenticity” (Hillyer 78).

But it has not stopped there. Even more widespread is the belief that Vlad’s blood-drinking is actually cited in one of the fifteenth-century accounts, the poem by German meister-singer Michel Beheim entitled “Story of a Bloodthirsty Madman called Dracula of Wallachia.” In their revised (1994) edition of In Search of Dracula, McNally and Florescu reassert that the original manuscript of Beheim’s poem (located at the University of Heidelberg) “proved that the historical Dracula dipped his bread in the blood of his victims, which technically justified Stoker’s use of the word ‘vampire’” (x). McNally later expanded on this to include consumption of the blood-dipped bread: “When he used to dine amid his impaled victims, he had their blood gathered in bowls on his table, and then he would take bread, dip it in the blood and slurp it down” (qtd in Ramsland 132). This has been repeated both in print and on television documentaries. But is this accurate? The relevant stanza in Beheim reads as follows:

It was his pleasure and gave him courage
To see human blood flow  
And it was his custom  
To wash his hands in it  
As it was brought to the dinner table.

So much for Vlad’s credentials as a vampire.

He has a much greater claim to immortality when one applies the second definition: “fame that is likely to last forever.” First there is his fame within Romania. Long before the suggestion was ever made that Vlad was Stoker’s inspiration and source, the voivode was being immortalized within the borders of his own country. In the nineteenth century, a number of writers, swept up in the fervor of a revolutionary movement that culminated in the formation of a Romanian state in 1859, looked back to Vlad as a symbol of independence and nationhood. For example, in Ion Budai-Deleanu’s epic poem Tiganiada (published in 1875), Vlad is presented as one of Romania’s first great national heroes, fighting against the Turks, the boyars, and the legions of evil. Poet Dimitrie Bolintineanu, in his “Battles of the Romanians,” also praised Dracula’s military exploits. And the famous late nineteenth-century poet Mihai Eminescu, in his historical ballad The Third Letter (1881), called on the Impaler to come once again and save his country.

Interest in Vlad among Romanian historians and fiction writers continued throughout the twentieth century. But it was the 1970s that saw the most significant output. A number of historical articles and books about Vlad appeared, especially in 1976, when the country commemorated the 500th anniversary of his death. Perhaps the most significant is Nicolae Stoicescu’s Vlad Tepes (1976), in which the author takes great pains to separate Vlad not only from the Dracula legend of the decadent West, but from the highly propagandistic accounts in the fifteenth-century German texts. The government also undertook many practical projects to re-enforce Vlad’s reputation as a national hero: statues were erected, streets were renamed, restoration of his Poenari castle was undertaken, and a commemorative postage stamp was issued in 1976 to mark the 500th anniversary of his death. In 1978, a feature movie entitled Vlad Tepes was produced which, according to Stoicescu, “portrays the true personality of a great prince.” Today, Vlad is still remembered. In the village of Aref, near the fortress at Poenari, the locals depict him as a hero and friend to the people.

But very little of this accounts for the world-wide immortality that Vlad has acquired. This, ironically, is the result of the very misconceptions I have been outlining. For were it not for the attention drawn to Vlad around the world because of these questionable connections with Stoker’s Dracula, most people outside of Romania would pay little attention to him. And while we rightfully challenge some of the findings of Florescu and McNally, it is their work which brought Vlad to international prominence, allowing him to join the Count who shares his nickname among the ranks of the immortals.

Works Cited:


