STUDIA PHILOLOGICA UNIVERSITATIS VELIKOTARNOVENSIS
VOL. 43/3.2 2025 VELIKO TARNOVO

10.54664/PAYH8190

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The Postmodern Sympathetic Vampire: Subjectivity, Romance, And Gender in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*

Abstract
This article aims to explore the literary vampire's transformation into a postmodern romanticized subject, telling his own story in Rice's Interview with the Vampire (1976). The first-person account dispels the vampire's otherness, encourages audience sympathy and identification, and renders him not only sympathetic but also attractive. The article is divided into four sections that focus on several new developments in the figure. Firstly, I discuss the significance of the vampiric narrative voice and subjectivity as a postmodern advancement of the character. Then, the text examines how the vampire's agonizing ontology resonates with the contemporary individuals' struggles to shape their identity and find meaning in their existence. The third section discusses how the plot "plays on the traditional position of the Romantic outcast to gloss the vampire subject with all the characteristics of selfhood" (Botting). Finally, I examine the critique of heteronormativity with which Rice reworks Gothic conventions in the novel.

Keywords: sympathetic vampire, subjectivity, postexistentialism, gender, power, homoeroticism.

With the publication of Interview with the Vampire (henceforth referred to as *Interview*), the first novel in her Vampire Chronicles series, Anne Rice unsettled nearly two hundred years of monster stereotype shaped predominantly by the works of John Polidori, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker in the nineteenth century. The radical generic shift is hinted at in the text when, journeying through eastern Europe in search of their origins, the vampires Louis and Claudia discover their fabled ancestors are sub-human zombies, little more than animated corpses. As he kills the last of them, Louis announces: "We had met the European vampire, the creature of the Old World. He was dead" (Rice 2014: 190–191).

The first book in the Vampire Chronicles series, as its title denotes, is in the form of an interview in modern-day San Francisco, where the protagonist, Louis de Pointe du Lac, reveals his vampiric nature to the world and shares his story. The reader is then taken back in time to 1791 New Orleans and to the decadent delights of nineteenth-century Paris through Louis's first-person account, interrupted at times,

in a manner typical to any interview where the interviewer listens and asks questions or reacts. The vampire/interviewee expresses his conflicting feelings about vampire existence as he describes his transformation, his (un)life, relationships, travels, and visceral struggle with the urges to feed on human blood. The first-person tale is a means by which the author elicits sympathy by creating intimacy between the reader and her vampire narrator.

Rice's exquisite and seductive vampires have invariably been recognised as marking the advent of the sympathetic vampire in popular fiction. Occupying a new, different world where the "old" paradigm applies no more, these vampires are bestowed compelling subjectivity instead of representing mysterious and threatening Others. Louis is not merely a monster featured in the text but the narrative's driving force. He tells the story of his development as a vampire in the first person, thus encouraging reader identification. Such a narrative position and focus on vampire subjectivity "reflect a change in cultural attitudes towards the outsider" (Botting 2008: 76). Telling his own story dispels the vampire's otherness to a large extent and endows him with feelings that reveal an extreme sensitivity and a kind of humanity, which render him sympathetic and attractive to readers.

The vampire in fiction has been read as a rich metaphor for anxieties concerning life and death, gender and sexuality, national and cultural identities, and even political ideologies (see Hobson 2016: 1). This article explores the literary vampire's transformation from a monster, the repulsive object of horror and fear in the nineteenth century, into a postmodern hero-victim, the romanticized vampire subject in the last decades of the twentieth. In order to trace the new characteristics added to this undead and undying literary figure, the text focuses mainly on the aspects of monster subjectivity eliciting sympathy and identification from readers, the vampire's depiction as a "decadently attractive being in a process of romanticisation" (Botting 2008: 3), and the portrayal of gender and sexuality within the end-of-the twentieth-century vampire narrative. To illustrate these aspects, I will examine the main vampire characters and some central scenes in Interview and demonstrate how Anne Rice breathes fresh life into the monster by providing her postmodern vampires with a new identity beyond the monstrous category of the Other.

The Postmodern Subjective Vampire

In Gothic Romanced (2008), Fred Botting comments that coherent critical readings of Gothic romances from the end of the twentieth century require viewing the texts through the lens of postmodernism:

> Post-industrial society brings consumption to the fore. The legitimacy of political formations and social structures is everywhere challenged and the "grand narratives" sustaining modernity's notions of human progress, reason and order break up: a commodified aesthetic eclecticism gains sway under the rule

> of money and techno-economic performance and "anything goes"[1][...] Hierarchies are levelled, cutting Culture and its canon down to size and scattering the pieces every which way. Subversions, re-evaluation, reversals ensue. Histories become plural, perspectives multiply and genres hybridise [...] Repressed seem to return at any opportunity, Gothic fictions and figures, too. (14)

The postmodern turn in the vampire narrative lies in breaking the monster's prolonged "silence" and filling the gap formed by the complete absence of subjective interiority in earlier literary and cinematic representations. In Postmodern Vampires: Film, Fiction, and Popular Culture (2019), Sorcha Ni Fhlainn explains that, devoid of their own voice and "represented through [their hunters'] narratives as one dimensional (and often solitary) beings that must be obliterated," nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth-century vampires were "foreign 'Others,' archaic Gothic intruders perpetually symbolising the past, and arrested in their [...] framework as intruders" (3). Creating and recognising a subjective voice indicates the vampire's advancement into postmodernity in popular fiction and culture. Ni Fhlainn finds Fredric Jameson's assertion that "[p]ostmodernism thinks of itself as a renewal of production as such after a long period of ossification and dwelling among dead monuments"[2] fundamental to a thorough understanding of the significance of the vampire narrative voice as a postmodern advancement from a nineteenth-century "dead monument". Postmodernism, she claims, "redefines and reshapes the narrative by providing a tantalizing insight by the very creature that was previously marginalized [and] this new subjective insight essentially destroys the boundaries between us and the monsters we encounter" (3–4).

Moreover, in line with postmodern scepticism and rejection of grand narratives, resulting in the equal treatment and convergence of multiple strands of written work widely available and consumed in society, end-of-twentieth-century vampire tales constitute postmodern mini-narratives. Postmodernity offers a pluralistic platform that highlights marginalized voices and mimics other established power structures through its playful bricolage; it transforms monstrosity into something familiar and potentially sympathetic.

American culture's suitability for vampire evolution in the final decades of the twentieth century is also notable. Entering the New World by means of mass communication, through films and television, as well as books, vampires go beyond the limits of their long-standing nineteenth-century archetype as aristocrats. The American environment and the postmodern era, marked by diminishing certainty and increasing doubt, offer great potential for subjective vampires to discover cultural catharsis in American literature, film, and popular culture.

[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester UP, 1984), p. 76.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991), p. 313, quoted in Ni Fhlainn, p. 3.

Botting finds few traits of postmodern aesthetics in the format of the confessional, autobiographical account of the vampire's adventures in Interview. However, although the mixing of the romantic with the vampire tale is evidence of little generic play and "an unreflective pastiche of genres," this "uncritical recycling of popular genres, along with the world-weary posture of the narrator [...] testify to the 'waning of affect'[3] displayed by postmodern aesthetics," and the popularity of the novel reveals that "[i]n rewriting the vampire tale, expanding vampire mythology and extending its geography [...] Rice turns it into an account of modernity [...] on the cusp of hypermodernity" (75–76). Botting reads the novel as performing the "doubleness" of a simulation, looking backwards as well as forwards, "combining a nostalgic simulacrum of a lost past and a narrative reconstructed as a simulacrum in the empty space of the present and its media" (76).

Vampire subjectivity stakes the figure's place within the contemporary moment through his awareness of being a "'new' vampire whose cravings and motivations have become individualized and personalized" (Williamson 2005: 31). The monster speaks and displays his suffering subjectivity. The vampire's newfound identity as the tragic narrator of his own immortal tale in Interview recasts him as a sympathetic outsider.

The Sympathetic Vampire

In The Lure of the Vampire (2005), Milly Williamson acknowledges the literary vampire's longevity in Anglo-American cultural imagination and notes that this figure "has become an image of emulation, a glamorous outsider [...] [of] whose otherness we find versions [...] (sometimes ambivalently) in ourselves"; the end-of-the-twentieth-century vampire "offers a way of inhabiting difference with pride, for embracing defiantly an identity that the world at large sees as 'Other'" (1). In her book, Williamson examines how these vampires' agonizing ontology echoes the troubling experiences of non-normative identity[4] in Western postmodernity and establishes the figure's resonance with the continuing dilemma of the self-found in Anglo-American culture. The vampire Louis in Interview is depicted as innocent (in a way, he has vampirism forced on him), a glamorous outsider, and a victim of circumstances beyond his control; therefore, this character can be seen as standing for personal dilemmas: how can we discover purpose and meaning in a world that requires it, manoeuvre through situations beyond our control, and uphold our values as good individuals? One of the questions central to both the novel's structure and Louis's quest is the problem of significance and how to be meaningful in a post-sacred world.

[3] Here, Botting also quotes Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991), p. 10.

[4] Williamson defines the normative identity as "white, middle-class, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, and successful" (2).

In Interview, Rice takes into the realm of vampire fiction the late-twentieth-century ethical inquiry into the concepts of good and evil along with the contemporary individuals' struggles to shape their identity and find meaning to their existence. Barbara Frey Waxman asserts that, ever since its emergence in the eighteenth century, the Gothic "has been hospitable to philosophical ideas and quests: to speculations about ontology; to analysis of the nature of reality and surrealistic states; to investigation of the constituents of moral behaviour; and to determination of the meanings of human existence" (80). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Anne Rice uses the vampire as a means of intellectual speculation and exploration of the twentieth-century human condition. Waxman argues that Interview "contains Rice's most complete existentialist and postexistentialist philosophizing," where she "offers existentialist paths to meaningful action [and] posits some postexistentialist conditions and ideas about moral choice"[5] – the vampire Louis is an epitome of the hopeful existentialist faced with the postexistentialist fear that freedom might be an illusion. Through the character of Louis, a reluctant killer and a victim of the vampire's compulsion to kill, forever in the grips of the urge to embrace ethical behaviour, the novel discloses complex twentieth-century relativism:

> Presenting the vampire as a metaphor for the ambiguities of human nature and of our moral energies, Rice extends [the] notion that evil is rooted in good: as she presents it, evil encompasses a profound knowledge of and longing for good. Interview thus explores . . . the tempting proposition that the killer obtains special knowledge and special sensitivity to life, and the vampire, whose life is death, has supreme comprehension and sensitivity. Rice gives this proposition an existentialist framework by positing that the morally sensitive Louis lacks supreme comprehension of the meaning of his life, even as he struggles to obtain gnosis or to create an explanation for his existence. Rice's postexistentialist addendum is to emphasize the *naïveté* of the existentialist assumption that one can obtain supreme comprehension and shape his/her own fate. (Waxman 1992: 84–85)

[5] Basing her argument on Mark M. Hennely Jr.'s ideas expressed in "*Melmoth the Wanderer* and Gothic Existentialism" (S*tudies in English Literature*. 21.4, 1981), Waxman explains that "the existentialist, isolated from all institutions, [...] confront[s] a universe devoid of moral absolutes, where the individual must construct his/ her own system of authority" – a condition that leads to "ontological insecurity" and to "the edge of suicidal despair" (83). However, she singles out "the freedom of choice and the ethic of responsibility" as the components of existentialism that "empower one to choose actions, to shape a meaningful moral life, to judge oneself, and to take responsibility for the consequences of one's actions" (83). Finally, Waxman posits: "[t]he difference between existentialism and postexistentialism [...] is that the postexistentialist cynically notes the relativity not only of morality, but also of freedom of choice, [thus] [p]ostexistentialism recognises that there are internal and external constraints on the individual's ability to build a good life" (83–84).

This becomes most obvious in the depiction of Louis's endless search for community and love. He actively seeks to end his existentialist condition of painful isolation, in the first place, by building relationships, which inevitably turn out unsatisfactory (with the human Babette, with the vampire child Claudia, or with the old vampire Armand), and secondly, by entering dysfunctional communities (the incestuous triangle of his "family" with the vampire Lestat and Claudia, or the vampire "commune" of the Théâtre des Vampires in Paris, disrupted by mistrust, jealousy, and power struggles).

Initially, it seems that Louis's profound loneliness can be appeased by his deepening love for Armand, the "old" vampire he meets in nineteenth-century Paris: "I felt now the rarest, most acute alleviation of loneliness [...] it was as if the great feminine longing of my mind were being awakened again to be satisfied" (Rice 2014: 236). Later, Louis says: "I felt a longing for him so strong that it took all my strength to contain it [...] The love I felt. Not physical love, you must understand [...] I speak of another kind of love which drew me to him completely as the teacher which Lestat had never been. Knowledge would never be withheld by Armand, I knew it" (Rice 2014: 254). This is the love and admiration a passionate seeker of philosophical and intellectual truths feels for a wise master. However, all Armand can teach Louis is not some hidden, ancient secret about the meaning of the vampire's existence but the complexity of evil. Disillusioned in his hopes and longings, Louis is finally forced to confront the universe's nothingness and accept alienation and the failure of love. When the relationship with Armand fails, Louis understands the futility of his efforts to create a valuable life that includes forging loving relationships and, eventually, embraces his postexistential condition, allowing his vampirism to lead his actions. During the final encounter with Armand, towards the end of the novel, Louis tells him:

> I wanted love and goodness in this which is living death [...] It was impossible from the beginning, because you cannot have love and goodness when you do what you know to be evil, what you know to be wrong . . . And so I sought for other vampires, for God, for the devil, for a hundred things under a hundred names. And it was all the same, all evil. And all wrong [...] You showed me the only thing that I could really hope to become, what depth of evil, what degree of coldness I would have to attain to end my pain. And I accepted that. And so that passion, that love you saw in me, was extinguished. And you see now simply a mirror of myself. (Rice 2014: 336–337)

Love and community, it turns out, have not been Louis's salvation but his downfall, which "propels him [...] into the postmodern world, where Rice destabilizes Louis's and readers' usual categories of good and evil by aligning love with eternal damnation" (Waxman 1992: 92).

In despair, not in love, Louis turns to the young journalist, hoping he would make meaning out of his story and warn humans of the dangers of eternal life and of the vampire's enslavement to his nature. He also hopes the story of his life, or rather undeath, would dispel any illusion of freedom to shape one's own destiny and shun evil. The novel's interview format is intended to convince readers to overcome their aversion to vampires and prompts us to challenge our assumptions about human nature and rethink the sources of good and evil in the world. The morally conscious vampire Louis is an appealing, remorseful figure whose compulsive urge to kill renders him a victim of his own nature and who battles against this limitation on his freedom. By witnessing the futility of his struggle, we are compelled to accept a post-existentialist perspective highlighting the idea that morality, freedom, and choice are all relative in a universe where the only meaning is the one we create ourselves, but where our ability to construct that meaning is also undermined. This acceptance is crucial to the character's journey, making his experiences more relatable to the contemporary audience. Readers of Interview are drawn into the postmodern paraxic[6] world of the vampire, where they are made perceptive to new objects of love and compassion and open to more complex classifications of good and evil.

The Romanticized Vampire

The postmodern vampire marks a shift in the generic and aesthetic conventions associated with the category of the Gothic. Gothic fiction was a romance form from the start – Horace Walpole, the author of the first "Gothic story," defined it as a blend of "ancient and modern romance".[7] In the late-twentieth-century version of the vampire tale, however, "[t]he Gothic genre's usual trajectory is reversed: a flight from figures of horror and revulsion is turned into a romantic flight towards them, now figures of identification" (Botting 2008: 4).

In *Interview*, the protagonist's first-person speech in quotation marks "positions the reader on the side of the vampire" (Botting 2008: 76), encourages identification, and renders him attractive, even humanized. His heartfelt remorse for killing humans to feed on their blood and his suffering turn him into a Romantic outcast and evoke sympathy. Botting notes that the vampire's first-person account is where the romance becomes "tinged with Romanticism" (76) and explains that:

> [t]he narrative plays on the traditional position of the Romantic outcast to gloss the vampire subject with all the characteristics of selfhood [...] Existing on the borders of society, the lone predator becomes a solitary wanderer

[6] Rosemary Jackson **(***Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion.* Routledge, 1981) explains that *paraxis* is "a telling notion in relation to the place, or the space, of the fantastic, for it implies an inextricable link to the main body of the 'real' which it shades and threatens" (19) and terms the space that exists both inside and outside of reality a *paraxic* world.

[7] Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story* (Oxford UP, 1982), p. 7–8, quoted in Botting, p. 9.

> seeking companionship and security, intensely aware of his difference and fascinated by the frailty and mortality of the humans around him [...] His alienation and disquieted solitude, his love of beauty and knowledge, along with his humane concerns endow him with the qualities of a Romantic self, tortured by self-consciousness and a questing spirit. (77)

By and large, Louis's tragedy lies in the way his cultural aspirations and humane sympathies contradict the conventions associated with vampiric identity and nature, which he cannot escape. He voices this painful realisation that "the killing was the serious thing, not the books, the music" (Rice 2014: 109). Furthermore, he sees himself as the victim of his sire's cruel and selfish tyranny – the vampire Lestat denies him any proper knowledge of their vampire nature and only uses him as the provider of a luxurious lifestyle: "[T]his vampire Lestat wanted the plantation. A mundane reason, surely, for granting me a life which will last until the end of the world [...] [H]e had me at a great disadvantage. He hinted there was much I didn't know and must know and that he alone could tell me" (Rice 2014: 16, 35). Both Louis and Claudia, the child vampire he and Lestat "make," feel oppressed by their vampiric father's denial to share knowledge of vampiric nature, thus keeping them in a subservient position. So much so that Claudia attempts to kill him in order to break free from his oppression. Presuming Lestat "dead," the young vampires embark on a journey of self-discovery and leave for Europe in search of their origins and others of their kind.

In the Old Continent, after a disappointing encounter with their zombie-like Transylvanian predecessors, the two New-World vampires arrive in nineteenth-century Paris, which for Botting "is marked out for its epochal significance as the cultural capital of modernity [...] where the vampire not only stalks the darker alleys in search of prey but inhabits luxurious hotels and frequents popular theatres" (78). It is the place where "the solitary vampire comes to assume the shape and role of the flâneur" (Botting 2008: 79), an observer contemplating the city's restless movement and its multiple distractions, which, however, leave desire and appetite unsatisfied. Botting argues that the vampire Louis "remains an ascetic figure, seeking more than a regular blood supply to sustain his immortal existence; hence his [...] appreciation of the *ennui* that attends immortality and his fascination for human finitude haunting vampiric undeath" (80).

Armand, the ancient vampire they meet in Paris, explains that the Romantic anguish and despair Louis feels towards his immortality are, in fact, inherent in the vampiric condition:

> How many vampires do you think have the stamina for immortality? [...] For in becoming immortal they want all the forms of their life to be fixed as they are and incorruptible [...] When, in fact, all things change except the vampire himself; everything except the vampire is subject to constant corruption

> and distortion. Soon [...] this immortality becomes a penitential sentence in a madhouse of figures and forms that are hopelessly unintelligible and without value. (Rice 2014: 283)

Without death, there is no meaning, the disillusioned Louis realises. Immortality means endless desire for, without death, he is doomed to feel ceaseless thirst for human blood: "It was as I'd always feared, and it was as lonely, it was as totally without hope. Things would go on as they had before, on and on" (Rice 2014: 238). Botting compares the vampiric to the human condition:

> The modern subject assumes a vampiric reflection. Like the flâneur, its condition marks an apotheosis in subjectivity: identity wanders aimlessly, intoxicated and repelled by the urban crowds and glittering streets and stores. The vampire's disillusioned Romanticism and its dissatisfied decadence, moreover, anticipates, with its radical freedom of existing beyond death, an alienation and lack of essence in tune with existentialism. (81)

The previously quoted conversation between the 400-year-old Armand and Louis continues with the old vampire declaring the younger "the spirit of the age" (Rice 2014: 286). The defining feature that makes the modern vampire the spirit of the/any age is his broken heart. Armand states it clearly when he delineates the difference between other vampires and Louis, "They reflect the age in cynicism which cannot comprehend the death of possibilities, fatuous sophisticated indulgence in the parody of the miraculous, decadence whose last refuge is self-ridicule, a mannered helplessness. You saw them; you've known them all your life. You reflect your age differently. You reflect its broken heart" (Rice 2014: 287). Being the reflection of an age's broken heart places the vampire in a romanticized position, which celebrates Romanticism by reviving its sensibility and signifies the exhaustion of affect from which postmodern aesthetics start.

In the Romantic transformation of the Gothic, monsters become increasingly humanized and alluring. Repulsion cedes to attraction, and horror gives way to romance. In Anne Rice's postmodern take on vampirism, romance brings a hopeful and positive twist to Gothic fiction's typical "Other" characters. In their very uniqueness, these characters shed old associations and anxieties to become heralds of new forms and relationships, with their previous threats now offering a promise.

The Postmodern Vampire and Gender

Since the 1980s, literary studies on the whole and feminist criticism in particular, have been changed by a new focus on how the production of and response to works of fiction are marked by gender as a category of analysis. Theories of gender and sexuality are predominantly based on a critique of the subject as a social, political, and cultural category and have raised queries about the construction of the gendered

and sexualized subject, proffering "radically new ideas about performance and performativity as the means by which the body becomes a signifying system within social formations" (Castle 2007: 102). According to scholars of gender and sexuality, the concept of subject is closely linked to identity, defined as a continuous process of construction, performance, appropriation, or mimicry. This perspective was formed under the influence of Michel Foucault's idea that "subjectivity and identity are not natural categories or essential features of human existence, unique and indivisible aspects of one's being, [but] rather the material effects of the discourses and images that surround us" (Castle 2007: 103).

Traditionally, the vampire has been read as a particularly fertile repository of fears concerning the instability of gender. Critical analyses based on gender and sexuality to a large extent dominate the debate on vampirism. The gendered and sexualized vampire lends itself readily to psychoanalytical and cultural readings. First and foremost, the notorious vampire bite is both oral and penetrative, confusing the boundaries between the violent and the erotic. Likewise, although the vampire occupies a superficially male or female body, it preys equally on both genders, further complicating the patterns of desire. In other words, due to its ability to disrupt culturally acceptable patterns of sexual behaviour and to evade the polarisation between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the vampire is frequently seen as a representation of the liberation of sexual activities and desires that have been censored in society or repressed within the self.

Literary criticism has repeatedly recognised the postmodern sensibility about identity and the critique of heteronormativity with which Rice reworks Gothic conventions in her lush and ornate prose. Her significant contribution to the development of the sympathetic vampire in fiction has been acknowledged by many critics who have emphasised the re-appropriation and reinterpretation of this archetypal male villain to meet her radical objectives. Gina Wisker, for example, outlines the performative nature of Rice's vampires. She points out their awareness that "they enact roles and that all gendered roles are constructs," concluding that "their insecurities align them with the complexities of the postmodern world" (187). Wisker reads the homoerotic relationships between the male vampires in Rice's novels as revealing the disruptive power of the erotic and maintains that this radical form of vampire transgression of gender boundaries "is no longer abject, rejected with disgust to ensure identity" but rather "dramatizes endless potential for radical alternative behaviour, for celebrating [...] otherness" (184).

William Hughes argues that the transformation into a vampire in Rice's novels is analogous to "an awakening consciousness of homosexual identity" and to an awareness that gay existence means abandoning "the cultural standards of heterosexuality" (163). The awakening consciousness of homosexual identity and the understanding that to embrace a gay lifestyle is to get rid of, or at least marginalize, heterosexuality's cultural standards are analogous to the transition between the states of life and un-death. Similar to counter-culture and alternative-lifestyle groups, vampirism carries a cultural burden, often exemplified through the use of

the "language of the closet" (*ibid.*). For instance, immediately after his transformation, Louis responds to his sire's suggestion to share a coffin with unease, to say the least: "I begged Lestat to let me stay *in the closet*, but he laughed, astonished" (Rice 24; my emphasis). The new vampire faces an identity crisis expressed through "the coded language of modern homosexuality" (*ibid.*). In addition, Louis's attempts to retain relationships with Babette Freniere, who is not only mortal but a woman, are met with mockery and a grave warning, reinforcing the notion of separation and altered identity: "These are images [...] of what you were and what you still long to be. And in your romance with mortal life, you're dead to your vampire nature!" (Rice 2014: 83).

George E. Haggerty also insists on a homosexual interpretation of Rice's novel. He maintains that "[t]he sine qua non with which [Anne Rice] mesmerizes her readers [...] is homoerotic desire" (5) and that the relations between Louis and Lestat, the vampiric couple in Interview, "can only be understood in terms of male-male desire; [therefore] they must be read as gay" (5). Haggerty emphasises the importance of the historical moment in relation to Rice's vampires' homoeroticism:

> Rice makes her vampires homoerotic for reasons that tell us more about their moment of creation than they tell about any historical precedents [...] [T]he homoerotic bonds [...] function as part of the self-consuming culture that has produced them [...] [The vampire] is the passive, the bloodied, the castrated male. He represents the eighties' hope – that masculinity can survive the emasculation that terminal straightness finally represents – as well as its fear – that every man is always already castrated by desire. [The vampire] is queer, that is, because heterosexist culture needs him as a reflection of its own dark secret. (6–7)

Commonly, as James B. Twitchell observes, the vampire has "served to explain the dynamics of human social and sexual behaviour" and has been a central popular culture motif utilised as "a paradigm of suppressed interfamilial struggles" (110). Taking her cue from Twitchell's observation, Candace R. Benefiel maintains that "the nuclear family of vampires [is] a major theme" in Rice's Interview and claims that this "incestuous, nuclear, vampiric family," consisting of two young male vampires (Lestat and Louis) and their "daughter" (Claudia), is "the most extensively and carefully realised of the fictional vampire families" (263, 264, 266). Ken Gelder is another scholar who notes the unconventional nature of the family consisting of two demonic gay parents and a "daughter" and explains that the queerness of this parent-child relationship "lies partly in the folding together of gay love with heterosexual incest/paedophilia" (113).

Isolated by its unnatural longevity and essential otherness, the vampiric family is a subversive and invariably incestuous version of the nuclear family, where the blurring of traditional family relationships and gender roles leads to preternatural tension. In Interview, the "original" vampire, Lestat, functions as father/mother/hus-

band, his "partner" Louis as father/mother/wife, as well as lover to the "daughter" Claudia, who is turned to provide a companion for Louis in an attempt to save the relationship between the two male vampires:

> "She's our daughter," [Lestat] said. "You're going to live with us now." He beamed at her, but, his eyes were cold, as if it were all a horrible joke; then he looked at me, and his face had conviction. He pushed her towards me. I found her on my lap, my arms around her, feeling again how soft she was, how plump her skin was [...] "This is Louis, and I am Lestat," he said to her, dropping down beside her [...] "Your mama's left you with us. She wants you to be happy [...] now, Louis was going to leave us," said Lestat, his eyes moving from my face to hers. "He was going to go away. But now he's not. Because he wants to stay and take care of you and make you happy." (Rice 2014: 93–94)

Claudia, a child for eternity who forever looks like a doll, is both worshipped and controlled by her vampire fathers. She is a figure "bristling with feminist significance" and "a visual icon of arrested development, [for whom] vampirism is no release from patriarchy but a perpetuation of it" (Auerbach 1995: 154). Similarly to Auerbach, Janis Doane and Devon Hodges argue that in *Interview*, "a decidedly angry woman [Claudia] does battle with men to rewrite the script for femininity[8]" (423). Trapped in a self-enclosed, strangling, mock family and doomed to be an eternal child/doll/vampire, Claudia is persistent in her enquiries concerning her vampiric "conception":

[8] From the very beginning, feminist criticism has been focused on gender and on an intensive examination of gender roles as cultural constructions. Within feminist discourse, the term gender has been used "to stand for the social, cultural, and psychological meaning imposed upon biological sexual identity" (Showalter 1989: 2). It is not identical to the terms "sex" or "sexuality", which refer respectively to biological male/female sexual identity and to an individual's sexual behaviour. Similarly to the categories of race and class, gender indicates difference and should be seen as part of a process of social construction rather than as an isolated category within a purely psychoanalytic framework. However, American feminist critic Elaine Showalter asserts that "gender is not only a question of *difference*, which assumes that the sexes are separate and equal; but of *power,* since in looking at the history of gender relations, we find sexual asymmetry, inequality, and male dominance in every known society" (4). Hence, the term "gender" implies ideological construction and is opposed to sexual difference. Although the two words are often used interchangeably, according to Showalter, sexual difference is part of the language of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis and bespeaks a separate but equal status of the sexes, thus disregarding the hierarchy of male power structures. The concept of gender as an ideological rather than a linguistic construct is central to Showalter's contention that gender studies can lead to a disclosure of patriarchal inscriptions.

> "He'll tell me nothing." she said softly [...] You'll tell me, won't you? How it was done."
> "Is this what you truly want to know?" I asked searching her face. "Or is it why it was done to you [...] and what you were before? I don't understand what you mean by 'how,' for if you mean how was it done so that you in turn may do it [...]"
> "I don't even know what it is. What you're saying." she said with a touch of coldness. (Rice 2014: 111)

Claudia is five years old when she is "created" by Lestat and Louis, "presumably just ready for female subjectivity, ready to turn away from the mother toward the father who becomes all things, father and mother" (Doane, Hodges 1990: 424). She, however, is denied any further physical development when she is snatched from her dead mother's arms and plunged into the eternal existence of a vampire child. When Claudia protests: "I'm not your daughter [...] I'm my mamma's daughter," Lestat replies: "No, dear, not any more [...] You're our daughter, Louis's daughter and my daughter, do you see? Now, whom should you sleep with? Louis or me?" (Rice 2014: 94–95) Doane and Hodges read this exchange as the "perfect staging of the oedipal moment, [revealing] not the girl's desire for the father so much as the father's desire for the girl child, the infantilized woman who is a perfectly obedient and dependent object of desire" (424).

Despite her ostensible controllability, Claudia becomes a source of disturbance when, a few decades later, the "little" vampire girl starts protesting against her constant infantilization and dependence in a world shaped by paternal figures. A hatred of the father, Lestat, the vampire who actually "made" her and Louis what they are, seems to mark her "womanhood". So enraged is the girl vampire that she attempts to kill him, which initially seems to free her and the more maternal Louis from Lestat's oppression. The act of killing is depicted as an erotic scene of violence: Claudia anaesthetizes two beautiful young boys with a mixture of laudanum and absinthe and "treats" Lestat to their poisoned blood. After he has drunk and is incapacitated, she stabs him with a knife. Doane and Hodges observe that in this scene, male homoerotic desire is rendered "an obstacle to women's desire for power" and, simultaneously, a weakness because "[m]en's taste for boys leaves them too preoccupied to keep track of the machinations of women, with whom they are not comfortable or familiar anyway" (425). However, Lestat is not killed, and returns after Louis and Claudia have got rid of his apparently dead body in the Louisiana marshes. Fearing his vengeance, the two conspirators set fire to the house with Lestat in it and start their European tour, during which Louis "looks for a homosocial origin in older vampires" while Claudia – "for a surrogate mother" (Doane, Hodges 1990: 425–426).

Indeed, she finds a mother in the Parisian doll-maker Madeleine, driven mad by the loss of her daughter and equally defined by male society; therefore, the at-

tachment between the two reveals a shared desire to reject paternal authority. Wisker deems Madeleine and Claudia "potentially lesbian vampires" (189) but also acknowledges that they act out the mother-daughter relationship, where Claudia seeks a replacement for her dead human mother, while Madeleine for her dead human daughter. What this signals is "a return to the Mother's body, a reunion that patriarchal law forces apart in everyday mortal life" (Wisker 2001: 189). In this relationship, the child, Claudia, craves a mother's presence and a return to this "primary bond where she is completely taken care of" (Bruhm 2002: 266), which the child must abject in order to gain an autonomous subjectivity. Her undead vampire fathers/mothers are inadequate and unsettling substitutes for the mortal mother, whose image continually lures and beckons her. Eventually, both Claudia and Madeleine meet a cruel death as punishment – ostensibly, the girl for attempting to kill Lestat and the woman for becoming a vampire, which is Rice's insistence that "cultural structures are extremely oppressive to women and the world of mothers and daughters is no safe haven" (Doane, Hodges 1990: 426). Doane and Hodges argue that Claudia's death "leads to the re-establishment of homosocial bonds between men" (424).

Similarly to Doane and Hodges, Gelder maintains that the journey to Paris, prompted by Claudia's attempts to kill the more fatherly, patriarchal Lestat, can be read as "a kind of oedipal return, an attempt to recover a lost maternity" (113). Paris is described in the novel as "the mother" (Rice 2014: 203) of New Orleans. It is the epitome of the maternal, as Louis explains: "Paris drew me close to her heart, so I forgot myself entirely. Forgot the damned and questing preternatural thing that doted on mortal skin and mortal clothing. Paris overwhelmed and lightened and rewarded more richly than any promise" (Rice 2014: 203).

It is in Paris that Louis meets the older vampire, Armand, as discussed earlier, and the two feel a mutual attraction. As it turns out, however, Lestat, still "alive" and kicking, has pursued his "offspring" there. Gelder interprets the resulting situation as an adaptation of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's erotic triangle,[9] where the struggle "between men," Armand and Lestat, is not over a woman, but "over another man, Louis" (113). This struggle costs Claudia and Madeleine (the most disposable vampires and entirely irrelevant to this arrangement) their "lives" when they are left to be burnt to death by the sun's rays. Another way of reading the murder of the two female vampires is as a display of patriarchal violence inflicted by Armand's vampiric troupe to victimize and punish the closeness between the vampiric mother and daughter, who die clinging together (see Wisker 2001: 189).

[9] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) provided the theoretical basis for academic queer theory. She posited that homosocial desire between men is expressed in a triangular textual structure where a woman stands as a putative object of at least one of two men. The woman's "function [...] is to be [a] conduit of homosocial desire" (99), *i.e*., to defuse or to distract from the powerful but socially "unspeakable" homoerotic bond between the men.

In Rice's novels, the vampires, who are linked to and yet remain separate from reality, inhabit a paraxic world, which constitutes a fitting space for articulating desires the culture both evokes and restrains because it is "a space of 'alterity' in which all that has been configured as 'Other' reflects upon that which has been configured as the norm" (Schopp 234). Thus, the text offers the reader two worlds: one similar to theirs and another, an alternative, paraxic vampire world, where culture-structuring paradigms are commented on and contested. Andrew Schopp observes that "[t]he vampire product creates a space for performing alternatives to social/cultural mandates" where "the act of reading allows the reader to participate in, and contribute to, the use of this space" (235). The performativity of the space enables the representation of the homoerotic. However, alternatively to the views presented earlier, Schopp suggests that, although Anne Rice's vampire novels feature a plethora of male-male couples, the representation of the homoerotic in them is marginally sexualized. The complete fulfilment of homoerotic desire in them derives from an enduring, explicit intimacy between men, which is not necessarily sexual. For example, in Interview, the process of Louis's transformation from human to vampire is described in explicitly sexual terms as a moment of indulging in sexualized homoerotic desire:

> [Lestat] put his right arm around me and pulled me close to his chest. Never had I been this close to him before, and in the dim light I could see the magnificent radiance of his eye and the unnatural mask of his skin. As I tried to move, he pressed his right finger against my lips and said, "Be still. I am going to drain you now to the very threshold of death, and I want you to be quiet, so quiet that you can almost hear the flow of blood through your veins, so quiet that you can hear the flow of that same blood through mine [...]" I wanted to struggle, but he pressed so hard with his fingers that he held my entire prone body in check; and as soon as I stopped my abortive attempt at rebellion, he sank his teeth into my neck [...]
> [...] I remember that the movement of his lips raised the hair all over my body, sent a shock of sensation through my body that was not unlike the pleasure of passion. (Rice 2014: 19)

However, despite the emphasis placed on it, this transient moment is not enough in itself and is not what these vampires desire. Furthermore, Louis and Lestat are not simply two males living together – they are two males who create a child vampire, a male-male couple producing a family. In other words, in the novel, Rice implies that superseding the sexual act allows space for developing emotional closeness and intimacy. In 1997, Schopp wrote:

> The paraxic vampire world necessarily forces the reading subject to compare the vampire realm to our culture, and in many ways Rice's novels expose our own culture's stringent prohibitions against intimacy between men as well as its obsessive focus on genital sexuality. If [...] sexuality is "an historical construction, which brings together a host of different biological and mental possibilities – gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires, fantasies – which need not be linked together [...]"[10], then we can see the vampire product foregrounding this "constructed" nature of sexuality in its non-sexualized (or at least marginally sexualized) representation of the erotic, and the homo-erotic. (240–241)

In Interview, vampirism is presented as an exclusive club for the beautiful and the refined – the vampires need to be beautiful in order to survive immortality. The emphasis on beauty in the novel can be interpreted in two directions. In the first place, this is Rice's way of establishing her vampires' evolutionary development and the distance between them and the sub-human beasts of eastern Europe. Fhlainn describes such dismissive treatment of traditional, usually European vampires as "celebrating new forms of American difference [...] where the new fledgling attempts to claim their unique status, while firmly relegating vampires of the Old World, often styled as variants of Dracula, to a barbaric and folkloric past" (45–46). Nineteenth-century works of vampire fiction frequently depicted the creature as originating from what then was seen as the periphery – "*primitive* localities such as the Balkans and/or eastern Europe" (Kostova 1997: 14; my emphasis), as opposed to the centre, "(north) western Europe", which "ever since the eighteenth century [...] has inscribed itself as the centre of civilisation, claiming the joint legacy of the classical Mediterranean and the Judeo-Christian traditions as well as the right to represent 'the old continent'" (Kostova 1997: 11). Rice obviously indicates that her vampires represent a significant evolutionary improvement over previous depictions. On the one hand, her vampires' beauty glamorizes their way of life and the appeal of the male physique, but on the other hand, Rice seems almost obsessively focused on safeguarding her vampires from the deterioration associated with early medieval vampire lore from the primitive European periphery.

Secondly, Louis's dieting on animal blood can be viewed as a striving to achieve physical beauty and perfection. Through his self-imposed radical super diet, Ni Fhlainn suggests, he is transformed into "the feminized vampire," and his femininity "is a potent metaphor in compensation for the overall lack of female characters" (5) in the novel.

Sandra Tomc also outlines the importance of the novel's preoccupation with dieting and hunger. Rice's use of "the twin paradigms of androgyny and weight loss" (Tomc 1996: 442) is a testament to her vision and creativity. Tomc suggests

[10] Jeffrey Weeks. *Sexuality*. Routledge, 1989. p. 15, quoted in Schopp, p. 241.

that these elements are not just tools but powerful agents of transformation, helping Rice achieve her generically radical aims of making the vampire a new person that she imagined as part of prominent 1970s "liberation" programmes – sexual, gay, or women's.

> Rice modelled the vampire's transformation on one of the most powerful narratives of gender metamorphosis available to 1970s culture: the story of successful dieting. With its promised dissolution of female secondary sex characteristics, the story of successful dieting forcefully projected an androgynous body, one whose challenge to traditional gender roles would lie in its exclusion of their physical signifiers. (Tomc 1996: 442)

For the vampire, the experience of erotic pleasure and reproduction ability are located in the mouth, not in the genitals, representing a "gender-free idea, [which] is powerfully associated in the novel with an absence of women's characteristics" (Tomc 1996: 444). Interview's community of vampires consists predominantly of men and children that are not meant to be read as either men or children – the vampire's body represents "a type of polymorphousness founded in the disappearance of the markers of sexual and reproductive difference" (443).

Katherine Ramsland has reported Rice's words: "Gender buries the issues, but non-gendered relationships provide an opportunity for encounters that build hotly, for satisfaction to feed expectation, for patterns of sensuality to expand into realms where lovers fear to tread" (348). Latter-day fictional vampires transcend gender, rendering homosexuality or heterosexuality irrelevant and limiting, and should instead be regarded as para-gendered constructs in which traditional male and female genders are merged to form a new whole. The distinction between homosexual and heterosexual appears irrelevant in relation to vampirism and unfairly restrictive, as vampires in late-twentieth-century literature defy the constraints of gender just as they have defied the constraints of death.

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The vast and varied body of vampire fiction has always been the fruitful medium through which many authors have expressed the fears, anxieties, and secret desires of their specific historical moments in the liminal, transgressive figure of the vampire. Postmodern vampires shatter the older stereotypes of their marginalisation and defy their expected role by becoming the tragic narrators of their own immortal tales. Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire redefines the vampire paradigm through reinvestment in the figure of the vampire, whose naturally transgressive and potentially revolutionary power she utilises to critique and comment on various contemporary topics. Her vampires have frequently been read as means for providing social commentary on late-twentieth-century concerns, such as HIV and AIDS, homosexuality, drug addiction, or on the selfishness and narcissism of western so-

ciety (see Benefiel 2004: 262). The focus on the vampire subjectivity in her novels recasts the monster as a creature of extreme sensitivity and pathos, a sympathetic and misunderstood outsider whose narrative position adds a Romantic effect that turns the threat of the vampire into an attractive quality. Moreover, the transgression of gender boundaries and the valorisation of homosexual relationships are some of the tools through which Rice depicts what is desired and feared, and feared because it is desired in the cultural context of the late twentieth century. Audiences have sympathized and identified with her seductive vampires since the 1970s because they epitomize various uncertainties and anxieties about the self in today's world with its incessantly changing and complex notions of identity and gender.

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