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The vampire of the third millennium: from demon to angel

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RESUMEN:

A partir de la idea de que existe un interés en alza por el producto 'vampiro' relacionado con los albores del nuevo milenio, este trabajo pretende explorar cómo la figura del vampiro se contextualiza en actualidad tanto en su apariencia como en su comportamiento. El corpus de este análisis incluye tres de los formatos audiovisuales más populares de los últimos años: *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries* y *True Blood*. El objetivo de este estudio es comparar y contrastar a sus protagonistas en estas tres versiones, además de identificar los principales cambios de la conceptualización 'clásica' del vampiro. Asimismo, analizaremos la relación existente entre esta nueva figura en el ámbito de la cultura popular, y entre los adolescentes en particular.

Palabras clave: vampiro, santificación, cultura popular, *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood*.

ABSTRACT:

Starting from the idea that there is a soaring interest in vampire-related products at the dawn of the new millennium, our paper will explore how the vampire figure is contextualised and shaped when it comes to his appearance and behaviour. The corpus of our analysis includes three of the most popular films to date: *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. The aim of our study is to compare and contrast the vampire protagonists these three films instantiate and also to identify any major shifts from the 'classic' conceptualisation of the vampire. Furthermore, we will try to understand how these transformations could account for the popularity of the vampire figure in general and among teenagers in particular.

Keywords: vampire, angelisation, popular culture, *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Exploring people's obsession with the ancient, dark, dangerous, blood-lustful figure of the vampiric Other, Ken Gelder (1994: x) gives a rather personal answer to the 'why vampires?' question: "The answer, for me, lies primarily in their unflinching ability to fascinate. That is, they evoke a response that is not entirely 'rational' – a response that may sit somewhere in between disbelief and, in fact, a *suspension* of disbelief." According to Gelder, the problem of belief is central to the fiction for ideological reasons, as it is meant to trigger a certain reaction, active force, or emotion. Overall, what Gelder's book does is to embed vampires in their cultural contexts, proving that such narratives are actually concerned with the anxieties and fascinations of their times: from 19th century investments in travel and tourism, issues of national identity, colonialism and sexuality, to queer identity, rebellious adolescence and family issues.

Based on a famous Romanian historical figure (Vlad Țepeș, who used to impale his enemies) and related to a notorious Hungarian figure (Erzsébet Báthory, who allegedly bathed in the blood of virgins to preserve her youth), the vampire has become a popular mythological figure, which forces us to confront our innermost fear – death. Over the past thirty years or so, the vampire has undergone several reconstructions, while taboos related to it have been challenged and refashioned. Capturing people's imaginations across time and cultures, the vampire has gained wide appreciation

especially among the young generation nowadays. Our paper, therefore, aims to investigate the appealing vampire figure of the 21st century, as well as to identify major shifts from the 'classic' conceptualisation of the vampire.

2. POPULAR CULTURE AND VAMPIRES: FROM FICTION TO FILM

From its beginnings and well into the 19th century, the core popular culture was print. As early as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), gothic novels catered to the public's tastes of being scared and thrilled, of experiencing vicariously new and exciting events and situations. Haunted houses, dark secrets, unexpected meetings with ghosts, spirits, or vampires are often the subject matter of such stories, and serve as settings or plots for another Gothic subgenre focused on vampires. In a fairly recent study on the vampire myth, Matthew Beresford (2008: 12) highlights the power of spirits, ghosts and other monsters that roam the earth, a power maintained by humankind's belief in such creatures, be they real or imaginary, whose 'existence' is dictated by our binary view of the world and our belief in God/the devil.

Appeared in the 18th century, the literary vampire gradually developed not only a career of his own but also a 'life' of his own, feeding on the readers' feverish imaginations and innermost fears or desires. From Polidori's *Vampyre* (1819), through Sheridan Le Fanu's lesbian *Carmilla* (1872), the vampire reached a climax with Bram Stoker's

Dracula (1897), to this day gaining increasingly stronger sexual overtones. Yet Stoker's Vlad Dracul – a rather complex character, whose evil nature is counterbalanced by his charisma and determination to regain his family's lost power – remains the first hallmark vampire-figure, sealing the vampire's fate within popular culture.

Stereotypically, the vampire is an alien, a parasite condemned to drink the blood of mortals, sleep in coffins, live in the shadows and walk out at night. It is his immortality that allows for his constant changeability and adaptability (Auerbach, 1997: 1, 8). At the dawn of the 1900s films take over from books and succeed in gathering an ever increasing number of spectators to a different medium of popular culture, allowing for a closer understanding of – even identification with – Gothic characters. Beginning with the 20th century, one cannot but notice a constant growth of movies which depict a plethora of vampire figures, ranging from Max Schreck's emblematic bad and beastly vampire Nosferatu to the beautiful vampires: Tom Cruise's Lestat and Brad Pitt's Louis (Rice, 1994). However, the most famous film figure to date still remains Bram Stoker's Vlad Dracul played by Gary Oldman in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 horror-romantic adaptation (Stoker and Hart, 1992), where Dracula is turned into a highly romantic character whose actions are guided more by love than by bloodlust.

Although vampires were at first depicted as repulsive and rather limited 'bloodsuckers', they have become (more) sociable, attractive and seductive creatures, constantly evolving and adapting to new environments, milieus, cultures and media (cartoons, comics, video games, music, etc.). No matter the media, however, vampire characters share some common features: they do not age, they have hypnotic powers over their victims, they have enormous strength and speed. Gradually, the vampire becomes "domesticated", as the focus changes from the human to the Other's viewpoint (Gordon and Hollinger, 1997), allowing for a decrease in the terror and savagery so far associated with it. The vampire has thus moved away from his traditional role as antagonist and turned into a sexually magnetic "all-American hero, with the added advantages of his super strength, magical talents and utter gorgeousness." (O'Brien Mathews, 2011: 2).

As Bailie (2011: 141-143) and O'Brien Mathews (2011: 4-5, 8) record, the modern vampire exudes sexuality, gives off a spicy individualising fragrance, and is a wealthy man of the world, wearing smart clothes, owning expensive cars and sometimes night clubs, yet he is marginalised not only among humans, but also among his own kind. He is both protector and saviour, capable of self-sacrifice. His otherness makes him stand out for the heroine, whose mission is to save him from his dark nature by accepting him as such, thus enabling his redemption.

Drawing up a history of the vampire figure in films, the American site "Cracked" identifies six key moments in the humans' fascination with this creature: while up until the nineteenth century the vampire was an animal (more precisely, a bat), Bram Stoker's book *Dracula* (1897) introduces the Transylvanian count into mainstream culture. Secondly, 1922 reveals to the public the malignant, scary but also "somewhat retarded" Nosferatu. Then, 1933 brings center-

stage Bela Lugosi's *Dracula*, who remains unparalleled until 1992, when Coppola directs *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, starring Gary Oldman in a highly romanticised rendition of the vampire Count. The next important film is released in 1994, an adaptation of Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*, which relocates the vampiric Other in the middle of queerness and queer theory, through the male characters' ambiguous attraction to each other. Finally, the last key moment turns around director Hardwicke's adaptation of *Twilight* (Rosenberg and Meyer, 2008), where the characters love strongly and fight fiercely.

However, an important milestone overlooked by the aforementioned site is the American TV series entitled *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997-2003), where a high-school cheerleader learns to fight threatening vampires and slay them one by one. According to Gelder (1994: 143), Buffy's belief in vampires equates with her own empowerment as a woman, the scope of the series being the mobilisation of an adolescent girl, who does not need rescuing by a male hero. However, helping the protagonist in the fight against creatures of the darkness, one vampire character comes forth as different from the rest: Angel (played by David Boreanaz) is cursed with a human soul (presumably of his pre-vampire self, Liam), a punishment meant to make him suffer for his past crimes. Although at first he is a reluctant hero, helping Buffy from the shadows, he then changes into a dark, flawed character because of the romantic relationship with Buffy. It is actually the first and only sexual intercourse with the Slayer (a moment of 'true love' and genuine happiness) that undoes the curse and transforms Angel into Angelus, the dangerously seductive, vicious and unscrupulous vampire he initially was. Even if Buffy saves Angel's life and they temporarily resume their celibate relationship, Angel decides to end it, believing himself to be an impediment to her happiness.

Angel's moral complexity (his conscience and sympathetic nature) forces the others to accept the idea that a vampire can actually be good. Rhonda Wilcox (2002) argues that Angel represents "an essentialist definition of good", as his goodness comes from the fact that he has a *good* soul – hence no desire to harm people; in other words, he is an "essentialist hero". Angel is thus one of the first embodiments of a vampire-figure subject to heroification and beautification. Moving away from stereotypes and one step further than Anne Rice's compassionate (and queer) Louis, Angel paves the way to the angelisation of the vampire in the 21st century, if we are to anticipate one of the findings of the research discussed further.

3. THE VAMPIRE OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

The object of the present study is the investigation of the vampire figure as put forward in three recent books, more precisely in their film adaptations: Edward Cullen (played by Robert Pattinson in *Twilight* (Rosenberg and Meyer, 2008), Bill Compton (played by Stephen Moyer in *True Blood* (Ball, 2008), and Stefan Salvatore (played by Paul Wesley in *The Vampire Diaries* (Lloyd, Williamson and Plec, 2009)). In our analysis we aim to compare and contrast some features pertaining to the construction of the

protagonist male vampires, as explained and discussed further on in this paper.

3.1. From book to screen

All three books focused on in the present study had their share of success, but what generated a genuine vampire craze and cults all over the world, as well as an ever-increasing online vampire fandom, are the film adaptations. The respective plots are presented in a reverse chronological rather than impact-related order, given that all three series have an enormous, nonexclusive number of fans.

First published in 2005, the first book of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (Meyer, 2008) still seems the most popular among teenagers and, together with its three sequels, featured in the top 10 bestselling American books for 52 consecutive weeks (Memmott and Cadden, 2009). The narrative develops from the perspective of Isabella Swan, an introvert teenager forced to move with her father in the godforsaken town of Forks. Here Bella meets first Edward Cullen and then his ('vegetarian') vampire family. While Edward is enthralled by Bella's particular scent and his inability to read her mind, she is fascinated with his otherworldliness (his aloofness, amber-coloured eyes, sparkling body, and, above all, his immortality). As they fall in love with each other, they have to fight not only other vampires who threaten their relationship but also their inner feelings of (over)protectiveness for each other.

The film *Twilight* (Rosenberg & Meyer, 2008), directed by Catherine Hardwicke, faithfully follows the storyline from the book, focusing on the love story between Bella and Edward, yet – because of filmic conventions – limiting Bella's internal monologue and confessional, diaristic tone.

Comparatively, Charlaine Harris's *Dead Until Dark* (Harris, 2009), the first book of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, first printed in 2001, is directed at a young adult audience. However, unlike *Twilight* which is elegantly limited to kissing and fondling, Harris's collection implicitly describes sexual intercourses. Here, too, the storyline unfolds from the female protagonist's viewpoint, the telepath Sookie Stackhouse, as she falls in love with vampire William/Bill Compton after vampires have conveniently come out of the closet. As she tries to find out the murderer of several women in Bon Temps in order to exculpate her brother, Sookie ends up in vampire business and draws the attention of the area's vampire sheriff Eric Northman. Wanting to protect Sookie and himself from Eric's power, Bill leaves town to improve his position in vampire society only to return to a badly injured and hospitalised Sookie, who had in the meantime fought and killed the murderer.

The TV series *True Blood* (Ball, 2008) created by Alan Ball, only finds its inspiration in Harris's novels, as each season (of the four so far) concentrates on one book alone. Therefore, even if the main plot parallels the one in the book (i.e. Sookie and Bill's love story), the subplots stray away from the original and feature much more colourful characters (for example, queer Lafayette, opinionated Tara, or sarcastic and shrewish vampire Pam). Moreover, the TV series contains quite a number of explicit sexually provocative scenes and sexual intercourses,

moving the romance-mystery narrative towards the erotic and pulp.

Finally, L.J. Smith's *The Awakening* (2009; first published in 1991), the first novel of *The Vampire Diaries Series* centres on Elena Gilbert, a high-school girl whose feelings are torn between two vampire brothers. Written from both Elena and vampire Stefan's points of view, the novel on the one hand depicts Elena as the most appealing (although not the most beautiful) girl in the school of *Mystic Falls*, whose efforts are directed at making herself likeable to everyone because of a past family tragedy. On the other hand, Stefan, a newly arrived handsome student does his best to avoid Elena and thus spurs her curiosity, as well as something deeper than she thought possible.

Unlike the book, the first of the so far three seasons of *The Vampire Diaries* (Lloyd, Williamson and Plec, 2009), developed by Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec, brings all important characters together from its beginning. Elena falls in love with Stefan Salvatore, but their relationship is complicated by the appearance of Stefan's evil and older vampire brother Damon, who wants revenge against Stefan. Gradually, nevertheless, Damon also falls for Elena, a descendant of the brothers' maker, Katherine, who at the end of the series returns with an agenda.

Although all books are centred on the love story between a human young woman and a much older male vampire, which makes them all romances combined with mystery-solving plots, the TV adaptations are quite a different matter. Of the three, *Twilight* remains faithful to its source, as the film fits into the romance genre. Comparatively, the series *True Blood* and *Vampire Diaries* are both hybrids, mixing together several such genres as romance, horror and pulp fiction.

In our analysis we will focus on the substance and shape of the protagonist vampire as put forward through words and images in the three films overviewed above. The analytical framework employed and the findings are presented as follows.

3.2. The analysis

The analytical framework we propose consists in a content analysis based on a category system which focuses on two overarching categories: character and context, both drawing on narratology. These two categories will be discussed and presented in what follows, including the subcategories pertaining to both. The design of a category system for our analysis served the purpose of rendering it rigour and thoroughness.

The vampire as protagonist

For practical reasons, in this study we could only restrict our analysis to a limited number of vampire characters, namely the protagonist vampire, who is also male in all three cases. The following categories were observed and compared across the three vampire characters in the three vampire motion pictures under scrutiny:

- Their traits (including their non-human peculiarities)
- Their trajectories (when and how they became vampires)

- Their preferences for female partners (the 'profile' of their 'chosen')

As regards the second category analysed, which we labelled 'context', some conceptual clarifications are needed. In a sense, our 'context' roughly refers to what specialists generally label as setting. However, as Jeremy Hawthorn (1997: 134) observes, an increasing number of narratologists seem to find this term problematic:

'Setting' is one of those terms about which literary critics have felt increasingly uneasy. Doesn't the term suggest a perhaps too-simple relationship between characters and action on the one hand and the context within which these take place on the other?

To this end, the subcategories designed and presented next, we hope, will shed more light on what we understood by the term 'context'.

The context

- Spatial frames (in terms of geography, place names and characteristics)
- Time frames
- Relationships with the community
- Settings of the first encounters with the female protagonist

It should be reinforced at this stage that the analysis done by applying the analytical framework to our data, both described above, was aimed at identifying the similarities and differences in the shaping of the three vampire figures in our corpus, with the ultimate purpose of instantiating a possible profile of the vampire figure at the beginning of the third millennium, according to the findings presented in the following subsection.

3.3. Case study

The profiles of the vampire of the third millennium strangely (or not) are dissimilar from those of its predecessors and very similar in essence across the three vampire figures analysed. The cruel, insatiable vampire villain has become a creature characterised by what we decided to call 'the four B's of the new vampire': beautiful, bright, bold and benefic. In other words, the three vampires are made of a hero's stuff: they are extremely handsome, (endowed with well worked out muscles), shining figures (in one case not just figuratively shining, but practically glowing in the sunlight), they are brave and protective of the innocent humans. They all have tremendous extra-human physical powers: they can move quick-as-a-flash or can climb sky-high trees in nanoseconds. They are similar when it comes to other traits as well: they are all young and old at the same time, they have a 'maker' and they have similar 'eating habits': they replace the human blood they thirst for with animal or artificial, industrially made blood (hence the name *True Blood* of the series). Eroticism plays a crucial role in the way they are constructed. They all fall in love at first sight and their chosen females are all human. Thus Edward and Stefan choose two of their schoolmates as their 'only ones', namely Bella and Elena, while the more mature Bill from *True Blood* sets his eyes on Sookie the waitress. (Their first encounters are presented in more detail later on, when discussing the category of context.) The women are obviously beautiful with such slight physical variations as hair colour. They all seem ordinary 'gals' even if

Bella from *Twilight* possesses a Cinderella rags-to-riches streak. The vampires' chosen are similar in substance as well: though apparently ingénue maids and damsels in distress, they turn out to be valiant, supportive and worthy mates. The main erotic conflict is embodied in the same time-old love triangle. The couples have many sexually loaded encounters and 'do the deed' quite early in the development of the story, with the exception of *Twilight*, where Edward refuses to have sex with Bella before marriage.

As far as the differences between them are concerned, they appear at the level of detail such as names, personal trajectories and nonhuman peculiarities. Thus their names range from traditional Anglo-Saxon names: Edward Cullen and Bill Compton to the exotic sounding Stefan Salvatore. They were turned into vampire by the fangs of other vampires but under different circumstances: two of them were tricked by 'bad' female vampires (Stefan Salvatore and Bill Compton), while one (Edward Cullen) was saved by a 'good' male vampire doctor when dying of Spanish influenza. Added to that, both their ages (the pre-transformation human ones and the vampire ones) differ (but not greatly): Edward and Stefan were still teenagers (18 and 19) while Bill was in his thirties when they were turned. As humans, they all came from different centuries: 18th Bill, 19th Stefan, while the youngest vampire, Edward, from early 20th century. Finally, their personal histories showed that two of them, Bill and Stefan, are reformed vampires (i.e. bad guys turned good), while Edward has been a 'good' vampire from day one, under the guidance of his father-cum-maker. As mentioned previously, their vampire peculiarities are fairly different: two can walk in the sun, while one (Bill) cannot; two sprout fangs when angry or excited, while one (Edward) is fangless; two can mesmerise humans while one (Edward) can read minds; two need sleep while one (Edward) never sleeps. All three possess various degrees of skin pallor but only one (Edward) sparkles in the sunlight.

All in all, the three vampire protagonists analysed are endowed with the basic ingredients of heroes: beauty, tremendous power, exceptional gifts and kind (unbeating) hearts in various degrees. They all possess various extra human powers but only one of the three is almost like an angel – Edward: devoted, utterly good and glowing. They fall in love instantly with human, beautiful, apparently helpless human females, who eventually prove to be loyal and supportive partners.

In contrast with the first category of our analytical framework, the analysis of the second one – context – put forward more similarities than differences. It is true that the macro spatial and geographic frames are similar, i.e. present-day North America; however, the other aspects pertaining to the sub-categories of pretext analysed are different. They will be summarized as follows.

The 'core' spaces of the three series are three small communities. Whether identifiable or not when it comes to the geography of the United States, their names are ridiculously symbolic: *Forks*, *Bon Temps* and *Mystic Falls*. *Forks* and *Bon Temps* can be identified geographically as being placed in a northern, mountainous region, (the former), while the latter is placed somewhere in Louisiana. On the other

hand, there are no clues as to where *Mystic Falls* might be located in the geography of the States. As for their characteristics, *Forks* is a wet, cloudy town, so cloudy in fact that the sun hardly ever shines, this being the reason why the Cullen vampires choose it as their home, since their skins sparkle in the sun, disclosing them to humans. *Bon Temps* is a typical Louisiana small town, where everybody knows everybody and everybody speaks with a typical southern drawl flavoured with French names. Bill is the first vampire who comes to live in this quiet community in his old family home. His future mate Sookie is the first to recognize him as a vampire. *Mystic Falls*, on the other hand, is a much more 'neutral', or better said conventional kind of setting, which rather than focusing on real-life characteristics serves the "function of providing a stylized and familiar setting within which a conventional set of happenings can unfold" (Hawthorn, 1997: 135), within the space of the United States, obviously.

The relationships that the vampires have with the community they live in are similarly different. They range from the communities being completely unaware of their existence in *Twilight*, to their presence being known to only a small number of initiated in *Vampire Diaries*, to the vampire species coming out in the open and fighting for their rights in *True Blood*.

The first encounters with their 'chosen' human females take place in the public space typical for each film: the high-school in the case of *Twilight* and *Vampire Diaries* and the bar in *True Blood*. Thus Edward and Bella first meet in the school cafeteria, while Stefan and Elena on the school corridor. Bill and Sookie, on the other hand, first meet in the bar where Sookie works as waitress. They all exchange long, tale-telling, soul-bearing gazes in the manga tradition. These gazes range from short, timid but repeated glances (Edward and Bella), or mutual long stares (Bill and Sookie), to the entranced 'can't snap out of it' reciprocating gazes of two soul mates (Stefan and Elena).

In short, the contexts in which our vampires walk and play are similar at the macro-level, but fairly diverse at the micro-level. In this way, besides walking in the USA contemporary space, the 'new' vampires dwell in small towns obscured by mountain mists, swamps or indefinite geographical spaces. Their identities are silent, partly silent or utterly vocal within the local community (or at large). They meet their chosen human partners in the typical public spaces of the local communities ranging from the school cafeterias or labs, to bars. The interfaces between the lives of the three vampires and their human counterparts are also variable when it comes to the former making their identity public: from keeping the vampire identity completely underground, to having it disclosed for a few chosen humans, to living in the open among humans.

All in all, the three vampire movies which formed the corpus are more or less romances, in the sense that their pretexts and conflicts are basically love stories. However, *Twilight* is the only one of the three which, besides being a motion picture in four instalments, is predominantly a romance. The remaining two, *True Blood* and *Vampire Diaries* are television series of a more hybrid nature: romance elements intertwine with pulp, horror and even fairy-tale elements.

Our analysis has tried to show how, at least when it comes to the three cases under scrutiny, the vampires are uncannily similar in essence, the differences among them becoming apparent only at the level of detail, yet utterly different from their predecessors. Thus the profile of the 21st century, new millennium vampire is becoming increasingly heroified, oversexualised and angelised. In other words, they are endowed with what we called the 'four B's of the new vampire': beautiful, bright, bold and benefic. They do not drink human blood, they protect the innocent humans and only use their exceptional powers to fight the villains. They love passionately and faithfully, love being the major driving force of their lives. Their chosen human females are equally faithful and passionate, worthy mates for exceptional partners. In brief, the vampire figure has travelled a long and turbulent journey in his quest of identity: from the total demon Nosferatu, via Count Dracula, Lestat and Louis to the totally beautiful, glowingly good Edward.

Finally and essentially – at least for now –, in spite of minute differences, the vampires of the 21st century investigated in this study put forward boringly similar and schematic figures, which can be labelled as picture perfect, dream-world loverboys. This might explain the popularity of the films among teenagers or young adults (and not only). As to what's in store for the vampire of the future, as concocted by both print and film, we're looking forward to see.

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Titulo: El vampiro del tercer milenio: su paso de demonio a ángel.

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