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Self-Control, Self-Reflection, and Self-Surveillance: Louis, and the Inception of the Modern
Sympathetic Vampire

The contemporary vampire has evolved significantly from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and this can be accredited to Anne Rice's depiction of a self-loathing vampire, Louis in *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Louis blurs the binary of monster and human, while still maintaining his figure as the supernatural vampire. Louis' monstrosity does not dissipate; it is transformed, so in a way he marks the turning point of the vampire wanting to integrate with a human society. The contemporary vampire is not human, but as evident in the character Louis, a combination of self-control, self-restraint, and self-surveillance allows the vampire to take on humanistic characteristics, like a guilty conscience. The gothic monster, the vampire, gives an "old form to new fears,"(Botting 16) ultimately, showing what steps and sacrifices one is willing to make in order to fit within the societal apparatus, and adhere to a moral framework.

Feeling, thinking, and looking at the world from the perspective of the vampire encourages sympathy and identification with the once abject one-dimensional monster. The novel consists of dialogue between a reporter and the vampire who narrates his life story, resulting in a narrative primarily built through first person storytelling, which is clear through the use of quotations. Rice's choice to use first person narration—that of Louis, a vampire—positions the reader inside the mind and life of a vampire. This perspective shift "begins to dissolve the conventional boundaries between the vampire and the human,"(Sarhan and Sahib

36) as the reader begins to locate the similarities with the character they are embodying.

Although Louis' story is unlikely to emanate an alluring and enticing vampire lifestyle to readers, this is the effect it has on the reporter—much to Louis's displeasure, and in opposition to his intent. The reporter's desire to experience the world as a vampire can be attributed to "[t]he focus on vampire subjectivity"(Botting 18). While within earlier vampire texts the vampire presented itself as a monstrous object, Louis is a creature of deep emotions and complexity (Botting). The narrative choice and newfound understanding and connection to the vampire is an effect of a shift in cultural attitudes surrounding the other; this is due to Romanticism's influence as it has turned the previous threat of a bloodthirsty monster into an attractive and sympathetic subject (Botting). Lastly, this shift in narration does more than humanise the vampire, it also changes the "paradigms of surveillance" through self-reflection (Erman 597). Unlike novels told through the omniscient third-person, which mirrors a form of panoptic surveillance, a first person narrator such as Louis, has the power to tell whatever and however with the only restriction being his own self-surveilling tendencies (Erman). The narrative voice gives emotions, thoughts, and agency to the vampire, ultimately bridging the gap between monster and human.

The vampire is still far from human due to its undying nature. The vampire is located at a distance from life and death, yet complexly intertwined with the two. It is immortally undead; therefore, experiencing neither life nor death, but a liminal reality. Vampires have power over life and death, since their very nature is to drain the life from humans in order to survive. But due to the essence of their survival depending on the death of humans, they view human life as trivial. Although for Louis his alienated distance from human mortality does not leave him apathetic, rather it creates an intense fascination with human life and death (Botting). This becomes a fixation, where his difference is highlighted from the humans around him. Ultimately

this leads to a longing for his unattainable humanity, that presents itself as “haunting guilt and melancholia”(Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska 221). The vampiric promise of immortality was for Louis confining because without death, living becomes an endless cycle of trying to understand the evolving world, but never truly being a part of it. His distance fueled his desire, which could not be fulfilled. Existing as a vampire is a constant state of repetition, so “[f]or Louis, immortal life only exposes an absence,”(Botting 21) one that is only able to be filled by the expectation of finite time—mortality.

The feeling of absence is only exacerbated through his alienation. Rice creates a vampire, who has various characteristics of selfhood: “[f]amily losses and responsibilities, impossible loves and homosocial attractions”(Botting 19) while being cursed to exist at the edge of the human world. Louis is a subject who embodies humanity, but is forced to keep it at an arm's distance. This alienation makes the vampire a flâneur; one whose identity is formed by aimless wandering and both an attraction and aversion to people and lively places. The “radical freedom of existing beyond death”(Botting 21) leaves the vampire without a sense of essence and meaning leading to a crisis of existentialism. This task of meaning creation becomes more difficult by the timeless existence of the vampire. In exasperation from this impossible task Louis states “I’m not the spirit of any age. I’m at odds with everything and always have been! I have never belonged anywhere with anyone at any time!”(Rice 284). His alienation only increased by his lack of connection in an ever changing and evolving world. This is the reality of the vampire, which Louis learns when Armand, another vampire, explains, “Everyone feels as you feel. Your fall from grace and faith has been the fall of the century”(Rice 284). This sense of isolation of one’s experience mimics that of the adolescent mind who cannot comprehend that

others feel the same way. Louis' feelings of alienation create sympathetic responses from readers, as the feeling of isolation is all too common.

Louis's internal battle for meaning leaves him in a state of melancholia, which is interesting because it is believed that melancholia can be seen as a "marker of heightened consciousness and a spiritual greatness that distinguished the extraordinary from the common mind"(Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska 224). Consciousness, specifically, is an important concept as it is one of the fundamental aspects of human existence; therefore, Louis' heightened consciousness makes him even more human than the average person, a type of monstrous humanity. This is further reflected in his constant self-reflection which is a crucial element in his formation as a sympathetic character. He is overly concerned with morality, to the point of questioning his own existence. He is so troubled by the nature of a vampiric existence that he says "I don't see our life as powers and gifts. I see it as a curse. I haven't the courage to die. But to make another vampire! To bring this suffering on another, and to condemn to death all those men and women whom the vampire subsequently kill!"(Rice 285). The remorse and guilt he feels is that of a human emotion; the stereotypical monster would not feel these, if anything at all, which further emphasizes the shift the monstrous vampire took through Rice's creation of melancholic Louis.

The suffering Louis endures is essential to his worthiness of sympathy. Throughout the novel Louis is tortured by his need and desire to feed upon humans, which contrasts with his desire to be morally good—a position made impossible through his very existence. Additionally, he can be understood as a victim as he was initially the prey of a vampire himself. Although he admits his vampiric transformation was not fully inevitable; Louis stated "Yet I can't say I decided. Let me say that when he'd finished speaking, no other decision was possible for me;"(Rice 14) this is because of Lestat's vampiric powers of persuasion, and Louis' current

disconnect from reality. Louis's passivity in his transformation and his first taste of human blood can be understood as furthering his victimhood, not a complete equation of innocence, but a reason for a level of sympathy to his predicament (Sarhan and Sahib). Louis' constant turmoil and suffering caused by his positionality of a vampire is furthered because feeding on humans provides more than sustenance, it is also the replacement for sexual intimacy. Even though he attempts to control his urges—by drinking the blood of smaller mammals—“the animalistic thirst appears to be a curse that can be neither resisted nor broken”(Davidel 99). When even intense self-surveillance, and self-control ultimately fails leading to “horrific attacks”(Davidel 99) the satisfaction gained becomes a source of immense guilt, and self-hatred. The self-pitying Louis is sympathetic because of his attempts to control his monstrosity.

Louis acts as a turning point in popular vampire texts primarily due to the agentic power he holds when it comes to his vampiric choices. This agency is granted through the retention of “an inherently human consciousness,”(Davidel 116) that propels Louis' efforts to act as close to morally good as possible. Louis' representation as a vampire who fights against his animalistic drive, opened the floodgate for future vampire narratives containing reformed creatures whose existence is a struggle due to their choice of self-denying what their body desires (Erman). The ultimate driving force for their self-restraint is their presence of a guilty conscience fueled by their past wrongdoings and each subsequent slipup (Erman). With this in mind, “the presence of a guilty consciousness does not imply the erasure of their monstrosity,”(Davidel 100) it simply gives the vampire a reason for wanting to behave and enact their monstrosity differently.

Ultimately, the contemporary vampire needs to coexist with humanity. So the agentic battle between morality and inherent compulsions further emphasizes “the vampire as a social creature

that needs humanity both as an antithetical point of reference for its otherness, and as a goal to achieve in order to ensure safe passage and reaggregation in the mortals world”(Davidel 100).

There are characteristics that go beyond a feeling of guilt which show that Louis has an element of humanity. The desire for the well-being of others “can be seen as a point of vulnerability, and an exposure to the possibility of suffering,”(Somogyi 120) yet Louis shows that he has this characteristic—again deviating from what the old evil monster would value. Louis' concern for those he holds dear is evident when he goes back to find Claudia within the Théâtre des Vampires. This is a moment where instead of protecting his own existence he values that of another being above himself. While “[t]he overarching horror concepts of monstrosity, death and dying, and youth and beauty”(Somogyi 64) are central to the vampire narrative, since the creation of Rice’s vampire characters there are also human qualities present within the contemporary vampire. No longer is the vampire just a monster in complete opposition to humankind, many of the struggles vampires face mirror that of the human condition.

Louis is a vampire who “offers a sympathetic and positive figure for an anguished, alienated human condition”(Botting 22). While the figure of the vampire is a “projective space [that] can be filled with any image or association,”(Botting 22) as the vampire character progresses over time it is beginning to reflect the concerns of the average person. Past vampires reflected the anxieties about sexuality, otherness, femininity, and change; there are still clear remnants of those fears within modern vampire characters, but predominantly “[f]or twentieth-century audiences, the vampire condenses pre-adolescent anxieties or concerns with consumption, body image and sexual difference,”(Botting 22) all of which can be seen in the things that plague Louis, and the vampires who follow. During an interview Rice stated that “Interview with the Vampire is about grief, guilt, and the search for salvation even though one is

in the eyes of the world and one's own eyes a total outcast! When vampires search for their past trying to figure out who they are, where they come from, if they have a purpose, that's me asking the same questions about human beings.”(Rice as cited in Sarhan and Sahib 51). Rice makes abundantly clear that Louis's internal struggles are the very same that exist in the minds of humans. The human condition is the constant desire to fit in and be accepted, and since the creation of the character Louis, that has been the desire of many subsequent vampires.

Through Louis, the inception of the sympathetic vampire, There has been a shift from the black and white evil monster, ultimately resulting in a reconfiguring of what it means to be monstrous. The rise of the self-controlling and self-reflective vampire, suggests “the normalization of self-surveillance as an integral part of modern identity”(Erman 610). Modern vampires continue to become more intertwined with human society, which is only possible “by enacting extreme forms of self-discipline, repressing, and ultimately reconfiguring their monstrosity”(Erman 595) The novel's first person perspective allows for Louis inner thoughts and feelings to be understood in a way that diverges from previous vampire depictions; this gateway into the vampire consciousness reveals an agential struggle of self-restraint. The traits which make Louis more human than past vampire narratives are the tendencies for self-control, self-reflection, and self-surveillance. Louis, a supernatural monster, experiences an existence with many similarities to the human condition—specifically the struggle to conform and fit within the social apparatus.

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