

A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT: THE HISTORICAL VAMPIRE IN ANNE RICE'S INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

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Abstract: This study deals with how the vampires are connected to culture and history in relation to Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. The concept of "vampire" is more of a social construction which was frequently powered by the society. The vampire beliefs were drawn from the different views related to varied cultures of Eastern Europe and their customs and traditions rooted in history. Once they entered the world of fiction, these creatures transformed into what the writers wanted them to be. The cultural attitudes through history related to spirituality, technology, disease, gender and sexuality have all contributed to these changes. As the vampires have developed and moved on with history, they have continued to represent humanity's constantly changing attitudes, behaviours and fears.

Key Words: Vampire, Culture, Horror, History, Religion, Spirituality

This paper entitled **A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT: THE HISTORICAL VAMPIRE IN ANNE RICE'S INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE** shows how history and culture of the time reflects in the world of vampires in fiction.

The work chooses New Orleans as the main centre of the tale. This is significant not only as the largest city in the state of Louisiana, but also for its rich history, French architecture, and colourful culture. It was under the control of different colonizers in the early stages of European control. It is the home of the carnival of Mardi Gras in the United States, and also the birthplace of jazz. It is one of the most visited cities in the United States. The mention of the plantations on the Mississippi River also assures that the place should have been previously inhabited by Native Americans before the arrival of the European colonizers, adding to the mystery elements. New Orleans and Louisiana are often used as a metaphor for the supernatural, and the makers of a number of horror movies have chosen the area for shooting. Her seductive and mysterious descriptions of her hometown form the most mesmerizing parts of the novel, along with the elements of vampirism.

Another major thing about New Orleans is how the life and death are interwoven at the place where the cemeteries came to be major tourist attractions. As the city is built on a swamp, the dead had to be buried high above the ground in stone crypts and mausoleums. The level of the water in Louisiana would have always made it extremely difficult to bury the dead below the ground. As the time passed, interesting sculptures, stylish carvings and other decorative artwork further beautified the tombs, and later came to be known as the "Cities of the Dead", another term which can point to vampires and the undead as a whole. To add to it, these tombs are more like small white houses, which further blur the frontier between life and death.

Louisiana is known to have a multicultural, multilingual heritage, and is strongly influenced by the mixture of eighteenth century French, Spanish, Native American and African cultures in such a way that it is different from the other states in the United States. The refugees from the French revolution and the Haitian revolution would play a major role in shaping the culture of the area later. The most important thing is that it remained open to different cultures. The vampires could easily become one of them; the strange and unknown humanoids, and be accepted as another minority who needed protection from the majority, even as the situation was the other way around.

Inhabited by Native Americans for many hundreds of years, the French Creoles were the first settlers, planters and also leaders of the territory of Louisiana in its earlier form. The state in its current form still has one of a mixed population, of Catholics, Protestants, Whites and Blacks. Even as Baton Rouge is its capital, New Orleans happens to be the more visited and the more culturally significant city of the state.

There are also the talks about France which lost its religious fervour due to the French Revolution and the rising power of reason. The old ideas regarding monarchs, aristocrats, and the Catholic Church were replaced by the new principles based on liberty, equality and fraternity, supported by genocides and terror. The goal of the campaign is often considered to be the destruction of Catholic religious practice and may be the religion itself. There was de-Christianization and the destruction of churches and religious images throughout France along with the forced exile, imprisonment and massacre of the clergy. It was bleak times for the Roman Catholic Church in a nation which used to be home to the defenders of the faith.

It is quite significant that Louis' birth to vampirism occurs in 1791, during the age of Enlightenment and just two years after the French Revolution in 1789. These major historical losses for both the church and monarchy, lead to a collapse of the institutions which have been exercising social control in the West. This had led to inconsistency and a doubtful future. Louis' immortality enables him to move through those ages into the twentieth century, along with following the rapid advancement of Western society towards secularism and the loss of religious beliefs. As Louis witnesses these changes with his own eyes, his doubts about faith only deepens and this shows his life in connection with the growing anxiety of the period.

The effect of these bleak times, the rise of atheism, the decline of the Roman Catholic Church and the decreasing morality is evident in the lives of not only Louis, but also the other vampire characters, along with the reflections of the liberal views. While Lestat says “ ‘Evil is a point of view’...” (Interview 98), Louis tells the reporter “Evil is always possible. And goodness is eternally difficult.” (Interview 16). Lestat's thoughts are further revealed through these words: “God kills, and so shall we; indiscriminately He takes the richest and the poorest, and so shall we...” (Interview 98).

These thoughts go further back to what Marius de Romanus had enlightened Lestat with, during his time with the younger vampire as a teacher, according to the events of *The Vampire Lestat*: “ ‘To be godless is probably the first step to innocence,’ he said, ‘to lose the sense of sin and subordination, the false grief for things supposed to be lost.’ ” (381). He had left Marius just two years before he chose Louis, his plantation and his money. Along with the story of his own life, Lestat talks about the vampires in fiction: “All during the nineteenth century, vampires were ‘discovered’ by the literary writers of Europe” (500).

Coming back to *Interview with the Vampire*, the relation between Louis and Lestat is still strained and the former continues to look forward to the latter for advice as he keeps the new vampire with him for his money as well as companionship. Louis never completely believes his vampire maker Lestat or in the existence of a divine power. The mortal thought never seemed to leave him, and he ponders over his life as any human would do. His scepticism is evident when he says: “Whether a man would have died tomorrow or the day after or eventually . . . it doesn't matter. Because if God does not exist, this life . . . every second of it . . . is all we have” (Interview 256).

The oldest vampire character in the novel, Armand is more radical in his views about God and sin. His life would be further revealed in another novel, *The Vampire Armand*, but here he reflects France's capital city where he lived and thrived during the French Revolution, as he talks to Louis as if to enlighten him and bring him to accept his existence:

This evil, this concept, it comes from disappointment, from bitterness! Don't you see? Children of Satan! Children of God! Is this the only question you bring to me, is this the only power that obsesses you, so that you must make us gods and devils yourself when the only power that exists is inside ourselves? How could you believe in these old fantastical lies, these myths, these emblems of the supernatural? (Interview 258)

The family of Louis de Pointe du Lac is shown as Roman Catholic, and he was born in France before moving to North America. He is shown to belong to the Louisiana Creole people. His brother also becomes extremely religious and even talks about visions, including them telling him to sell everything in Louisiana and use the money to do God's work in France, and thus turn the tide against the falling belief in God and the rise of non-believers. Lestat de Lioncourt, the next important character, was also born in France. Anne Rice herself was born to European parents, Irish to be exact, and she was born at New Orleans.

Louis clearly remembers the day of his transformation and recollects the year as 1791. It was the time when the area was under the Spanish control. There were also Irish and German immigrants along with the African slaves, Native Americans, people of mixed blood, as well as the Spanish and the French, thus having that cross-cultural and multilingual heritage. There was no particular culture or citizens of a certain nation which had permanent superiority.

Among these different cultures, it was quite easy for a vampire to exist without being noticed among the large variety of people in such an exotic place. It would serve as an ideal situation, or rather a hiding place. They would be considered to be belonging to another culture, and would be left alone with their customs and traditions. There would be no questions asked. Louis says in the novel:

This was New Orleans, a magical and magnificent place to live. In which a vampire, richly dressed and gracefully walking through the pools of light of one gas lamp after another might attract no more notice in the evening than hundreds of other exotic creatures-if he attracted any at all, if anyone stopped to whisper behind a fan, ‘That man...how pale, how he gleams...how he moves. It's not natural!’ (Interview 45-46)

As a major port, New Orleans had the largest slave market in the domestic slave trade. Later, the first successful slave revolt in history would begin, leading eventually to the founding of Haiti and the arrival of refugees to New Orleans, both black and white. In 1795, there were people from the French colony of Saint-Domingue who arrived at their plantation, possibly as a result of the revolution and Louis talks about how they were different from the other slaves. There is also an uprising in the work, as the slaves understand that there is something wrong out there, and they fear for the monsters for which they work.

This leads to Louis and Lestat coming under the shadow of doubt since the revolution. When Louis' slaves discover the true nature of their masters, they have no option but to try to kill them, the personifications of evil. The vampires are also shown as returning to New Orleans, one after the other, showing that nothing has changed about the place even after so many years. It is

to be noted that after her initial success, Anne Rice herself resettles to New Orleans in the 1980s. Rice's later group of novels about the Mayfair witches include a number of voodoo practices and beliefs, especially those concerned with the frontier between life and death, and the human relations with the demons of the other world.

When they later move through Europe, Louis says that they never really had to bother about disguising the kill, as the ravages of fever, plague and crime always outdid them as killers. They could also find strong beliefs related to the animated corpses and vampires in a number of places where they stayed. Louis talks about the vampires they meet in Eastern Europe as ugly, mindless animated corpses which hunt desperately to feed, something which is closer to the traditional Eastern European beliefs in which there are no glorified figures. Here, it is seen that the creature even attacks the other vampires, and is driven only by its one remaining sense, its basic instinct that is to feed. They were on the advanced stages of decomposition resembling the zombies of contemporary culture.

When they reached Paris, they found it easy to mix with the crowd as it was a popular travel destination at that time too, and there were so many tourists visiting Paris and the suburbs in France. They could easily find a place to live undetected, and was able to move around like the other tourists. The Parisian vampire coven, Theatre des Vampires is shown as a civilized vampire group disguised as a theatre group with their own rules of existence, under their leader; the oldest vampire around, Armand. The concept of vampirism being a spectacle is emphasised by this theatrical setting. They mock human existence and feel the need to obey the rules. They support each other, and respect their leader, Armand; a procedure which continues until it is burnt down by Louis as the revenge for killing Claudia.

The differentiation between the East and the West had always existed, from the Greco-Persian Wars, through the division of the Roman Empire and to the time of writing the work that is during the Cold War when the Europe itself was divided into the Western and the Eastern Bloc, sided with the United States and the Soviet Union. Along with the cultural and political difference which already existed, there is a definite contrast between the East and the West in Rice's work, as the vampires of Eastern Europe are nothing better than the walking dead, now termed as zombies, with civilized vampires thriving in Western Europe.

The culture of each age has been projected in the works of that period, and *Interview with the Vampire* remains a monumental text in that case, as without this work, such an understanding of the vampire would have been limited. Its use of the myths and its combination with the history and culture are nothing less than admirable. Without its success, there might have been no more works based on the same, and the vampire legend could have not reached the popularity which it enjoys right now. It continuously proves again and again that the vampire is a cultural construct with its characters, locations and the use of myth.

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