



Evil is a Point of View:

The Interplay between Evil, Vampire Nature and Identity in *Interview with the Vampire*

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Abstract

When considering the current developments in popular culture, the steadily rising popularity of vampire narratives is stunning: from *Interview with the Vampire* to *Twilight*, a wide range of different conceptions of the vampire circulates. The introspective, dark, brooding and attractive vampire whose nature becomes highly eroticised is present everywhere, but what about the undeniable dark side of a ruthless killer that every vampire necessarily possesses? In other works, such as *The World on Blood* written by Jonathan Nasaw in 1996, the vampire is not even considered supernatural anymore and instead is simply a human whose genetic predisposition makes him or her addicted to drinking blood. At the same time, there is a steadily growing fascination with the concept of evil and villainous characters in both popular and academic culture, with several current academic conferences dedicated precisely to this matter. This paper analyses the way vampire identity is dependent on evil and how vampire nature in general is portrayed in *Interview with the Vampire*, and compares this to the portrayal of these elements in its movie adaptation. Especially the character of Claudia is cited as a prime example for vampire nature as being animalistic and evil, where the gothic trope of the innocent victimised virgin is the reason for her capability of pure evil.

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Contemporary gothic has proven to be immensely popular especially in young adult fiction, as the recent popularity of works like the *Twilight* saga shows. Particularly vampire gothic has been on the rise ever since the fateful release of *Interview with the Vampires* in 1976, the first in Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* series which also includes the accompanying film adaptations *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and *Queen of the Damned* (2002).

What, then, is the source of this popularity? According to Bohn, Anne Rice's vampires, and the breed of self-reflective vampires following in their wake, reflect contemporary society's preoccupation with cultural issues in fear and desire. Therefore, "[s]ociety needs the vampire in a world that is uncertain, that offers sexual double standards and strict ideals on the nature of love and family, and where violence is seemingly everywhere as it is broadcast in mass to the populace" (36). The popularity of vampires can be further situated within the fascination with evil in popular culture. According to Heit, "evil occupies a central position in our cultural conception of narrative and morality in its capacity to interrogate the moral assumptions underlying a simplified notion of the good" (6), and the lines between good and bad characters are easily blurred because both employ similar methods (8). In a previous work, I have established that

[r]egardless of their specific function and type [...] villains provide fascinating character concepts for the very reason that they deal with something so essentially human. [...] They present evil as both an alternative viewpoint and the embodiment of everyone's dark side [...] Examining villains means examining oneself to some extent. (Schäfer 143)

This is another reason why vampires, now understood as dark brooding anti-heroes, might be popular amongst contemporary audiences.

To arrive at a better understanding of the significance of vampire fiction in contemporary society, it is necessary to establish today's vampires' historical turning point and initial background. This paper examines the link between identity, evil and vampire nature in *Interview with the Vampire* and compares these elements to its film adaptation.

Evil, Vampire Nature and Identity

In *Interview with the Vampire*, the vampire Louis recounts the story of his existence to a young reporter. Turned by another vampire called Lestat, he has been suffering and struggling with his vampire nature for 200 years, strongly conflicted about the moral implications especially after Lestat turns the five-year old orphan Claudia to forcefully form a 'nuclear family' and prevent Louis from leaving him. After years of coexistence, Claudia attempts to kill Lestat and leaves with Louis on a voyage to seek other vampires. Her death at the hand of a Parisian vampire coven to punish her for Lestat's attempted murder eventually drives all human emotion from Louis after avenging her; he grows indifferent and finally leaves Armand, the former leader of the vampire coven.

What is this vampire nature that Louis suffers? This is the narrative's central conflict; not only is Louis trying to come to terms with who and what he is, but to do so he needs clarity and closure over this nature. In a desperate attempt to connect with a mortal, he proclaims, "I don't know whether I come from the devil or not! I don't know what I am! I am to live to the end of the world, and I do not even know what I am!" (Rice 66). Ironically, it appears that an uncontested truth about his nature would absolve him from moral conflicts, as he talks about "what consolation it would be to know Satan, [...] to know that [he] belonged to him totally, and thus put to rest forever the torment of this ignorance. To step through some veil that would forever separate [him] from all that [he] called human nature" (148). He feels highly conflicted about taking human life, which to him constitutes "real evil" (215). Louis is stuck within this moral human framework which divorces him from his vampire nature; Lestat

criticises him for acting “as if the ‘mortal coil’ had not been shaken off” (32). Once Louis embraces his vampire nature completely in making a vampire companion for Claudia, he insists that “[w]hat died tonight in this room was not that woman. [...] What has died in this room tonight is the last vestige in me of what was human” (247). This suggests that human and vampire nature are incompatible. His humanity is the element that gives his character depth; after Claudia’s death, his life becomes shallow, without passion, and he loses his sense of identity that was closely tied to his human identity. In this, he is different from other vampires – from the predatory Lestat celebrating all that is evil; the child vampire Claudia; Armand who is “evil with infinite gradations and without guilt” (258); and from the decadent vampires at the Théâtre des Vampires in Paris. In the latter, “real vampires *act* as vampires for a mesmerized audience. [...] They show [vampirism] to have been (always?) a mode of representation, a *sign* of vampirism [...] To be a vampire is, in other words, to *act* like a vampire” (Gelder, qtd. in Cavallaro 186, original emphasis).

Contrary to pre-Rice vampire fiction¹, vampires in the *Vampire Chronicles* are no longer portrayed as universally evil (Palfi 38), rather focusing on the different gradations of good and evil in the different characters, and adopting a more complex moral stance than a binary attitude. While this may hold true for the rest of the *Vampire Chronicles*, Louis as the first-person narrator of this novel presents a perspective firmly embedded within this binary framework. His action-oriented attitude is otherwise only reflected by non-vampire characters like plantation slaves, based on the “knowledge [...] of myth which has fed them with these evil, anti-Christian perspectives of the vampire” (ibid). Lestat represents ultimate evil to Louis. He is “disrespecting of other people and the value of their lives, [...] despises any kind of weakness, [...] is very openly blasphemous” (Schäfer 78-79). Above all, he is a sadist who takes pleasure in his victims’ sufferings. As the first vampire that Louis knows, he bases his preconceptions about vampirism on Lestat. The core of Lestat’s character concept is presented

¹ An exploration of the pre-Rice vampire, for instance Count Dracula, goes beyond the scope of this paper. For an extensive approach to this topic, see Bohn and Anttonen.

in his moral relativism: “*Evil is a point of view* [...] We are immortal. And what we have before us are the rich feasts that conscience cannot appreciate and mortal men cannot know without regret” (Rice 82; Schäfer 90, original emphasis). He employs two inherently different justifications when discussing evil, on the one hand presenting evil as relative, thus declaring that it is also a conscious process (Schäfer 90), and on the other hand appealing to

vampire nature, which is killing [...]because vampires are p]redators. Whose all-seeing eyes were meant to give them detachment. The ability to see a human life in its entirety, not with any mawkish sorrow but with a thrilling satisfaction in being the end of that life, in having a hand in the divine plan.
(Rice 77-78)

Particularly the latter, predatory viewpoint enhances the animalistic image of vampires; both inhuman and *above* humans. This is exemplified in Louis’s description of other vampires as “feline” (16) or as “devoid of the habit of human gesture, gesture rooted in necessity, ritual, fluctuation of mind; and his stillness now was unearthly” (216), and he claims that Armand’s “voice [is] low and even more measured than Claudia’s voice, far less human than [his] own” (212). The ambiguous religious framework – the uncertainty whether God and Satan even exist – raises them above human nature because “[they] are the creatures of highest consciousness in the universe. [They] alone understand the passage of time and the value of every minute of human life” (215). Here, vampires essentially treat humans the way humans treat animals, as a food source. Although initially presented as a choice when Louis feeds on animals, the novel soon establishes that feeding on human blood is “the ultimate experience” (30) and “physical love culminates and is satisfied in one thing, the kill” (230). The coven in Paris talks about killing humans in a similar manner that humans might talk about going on a hunt (223).

Claudia: the Prime Vampire?

Claudia potentially gives the most insight into the issues of (evil) vampire nature and identity because she is the only 'pure' vampire, the only one not bound to mortal preconceptions in any way. All other vampires need to make a conscious moral choice at one point or another during their existence, but no matter how inhuman they behave or see themselves, their actions are still informed by their pre-vampiristic mortal life and the experiences they gathered throughout. Even Lestat, who claims that evil is relative, or Armand, who claims that it does not matter because "no sin matters [...] No sin achieves evil" (Rice 215), are at least conscious of the existence of such a framework and operate either within or consciously outside it. Claudia however was turned into a vampire when she was five years old, and is thus introduced to vampirism with a childish instinctual innocence. It is noteworthy that she is first presented in a highly animalistic manner when "[s]he gnawed at first, as if she meant to devour his flesh, and then Lestat showed her what to do" (86). She is soon instructed by Lestat in the ways of killing and embraces this without restraint, "for little child she was, but also fierce killer now capable of the ruthless pursuit of blood with all a child's demanding" (90). As time passes, Claudia becomes more demanding and more selective in her victims (96). Louis consistently describes her as inhuman, and even she herself is aware of the fact that there is nothing human about herself: "I have no human nature. And no short story of a mother's corpse and hotel rooms where children learn monstrosity can give me one. I have none" (108).

Therefore Claudia can be seen as the prime vampire, the only vampire who does not have any conception of what it is to be human, and with nothing to gain from such knowledge. In this sense, she might have more in common with the mindless instinctual vampires that they find in Europe than she believes. Furthermore, she is the only one of her kind, for the vampire codex as described by the vampires in Paris forbids the creation of child vampires as they are doomed to be helpless and unable to be self-sufficient for all eternity.

On the one hand, Claudia can be interpreted as a victim, as she was turned into a vampire without her consent and without any way to resist. She is constantly dependent on grown-up vampires to help her through life simply because of her physique, and her suffering stems from being unable to grow up, to become self-sufficient and self-reliable, instead stuck in the body of a little girl while her mind ages and matures. Claudia is described as both angelic and demonic, but because of her status as a child, she cannot be considered a *femme fatal*, forever remaining an outsider even among female vampires (Reumüller 30). On the other hand, Claudia is a dangerous predator and victimises humans by playing with them cruelly, similar to Lestat's hunting. She is incredibly intelligent and sophisticated, which in combination with her childish innocence creates a chilling effect. Her character, then, is one that investigates the nature of evil in the most elaborate manner. Renner explains that this is a rather universal characteristic of evil children in film and literature:

Is the evil child the result of an imperfect environment and thus redeemable, or a sign of inherent corruption? Our explanation for the evil child mirrors the way we view ourselves: is there evil in the world because we have gone astray, or because of we have a natural propensity for wickedness and cruelty? ("Evil Children I" 84-85)

Claudia is possibly one of the most horrifying examples in this manner. Vampire children in other works are often portrayed as feral children who are "driven purely by base hungers and instincts" (Renner, "Evil Children II" 185). Claudia however is aware of herself and the situation. She toys with her victims, chooses them for a reason, and contrary to Lestat's insistence about vampire nature, she kills discriminately (Rice 96).

Interestingly, it is precisely Claudia's childish innocence that enables her to be a truly evil vampire and ruthless killer, although it is debatable whether children, who do not have the framework to make informed moral decisions, can be described as evil at all (Renner, "Evil Children I" 84). Louis, too, is aware of this: "Now I knew her to be less human than

either of us, less human than either of us might have dreamed. Not the faintest conception bound her to the sympathies of human existence” (Rice 136). Claudia starts to hate both Lestat and Louis after finding out the truth about her creation, and she kills Lestat, explaining it as a logical decision that was almost inevitable: “And why not kill him! [...] I have no use for him! I can get nothing from him! And he causes me pain, which I will not abide!” (113). Louis is shocked about her immoral, unemotional and calculated attitude that might have been prevented if she had consciously experienced her insertion into a moral framework before she became a vampire. She only regrets killing Lestat because she is afraid that Louis might leave her, activating her survival instinct, not because she recognises that her actions were wrong (128); this is one of the reasons why the vampire coven in Paris executes her. Despite her intelligence, she is unable to conceive of the concept of morality – “Let me put your conscience at ease, though I’ll never know precisely what it is” (178) – and unlike Louis, she sees her immorality as an advantage (169). Keeping such findings in mind, her capability for actual emotion is debatable. Although Louis and her are lovers and she is very passionate about her suffering, her main expressed emotion is anger and hatred. This is exemplified by Louis once he casts aside his human side: “I understand for the first time in my life what she feels when she forgives me for being myself whom she says she hates and loves: *she feels almost nothing*” (250, original emphasis). A vampire’s identity, then, is tied ironically to the extent to which they are human, and draws strongly on the state of mind they were in when they were made a vampire. Louis’s predisposition, for instance, was a perpetual state of guilt because of his brother’s death, and hence his vampire identity is largely constructed around guilt too; “[w]hile other vampires in literature [...] have embraced their evil and murderous natures without conscience, Anne Rice was the first to show the moral ambivalence a fledgling vampire might feel” (Rout 473). Only in her later works do the older vampires consciously adapt a moral code as well and make it part of their vampire identity (476).

Playing at Evil? Vampire Identity in *The Interview with the Vampire* (1994)

In Neil Jordan's adaptation, vampire nature as predatory and based on killing is established from the very beginning in Louis's (Brad Pitt) explanation that he had initially waited for the reporter in an alley to feed on him. This departs significantly from the novel, in which they first meet at a bar (Rice 9). Louis immediately sets his vampire nature apart from general human nature, claiming, "I haven't been human for 200 years."² After establishing how Louis wallows in self-pity after his wife's death (replacing his brother's death from the novel), Lestat's (Tom Cruise) first depiction is animalistic; he hisses when drinking from Louis and stalks around his bedroom like a predator when offering him the choice of vampirism over human life. The many elements and sub-plots that are eliminated in the film make it more straightforward and less introspective than the novel; core conversations about vampire nature in relation to evil are kept in the film, thus marking this aspect as essential. Lestat still insists on evil being a viewpoint, and Armand (Antonio Banderas) insists on it being irrelevant.

By eliminating much of the moral introspection and Louis's consequential suffering, vampire nature is established mainly in relation to death and killing. Tom Cruise depicts Lestat as a superficial, mocking villain for whom the question of killing is an aesthetic one. Indeed, humans are often referred to the way that humans might refer to animal products, which again reinforces the parallelism to the food chain. He is both disgusted and amused at Louis's insistence on feeding on animals, and claims that certain types of humans taste better than others. For instance, it is his opinion that "evil-doers are easier [to kill] and they taste better," and with changing times, he regrets not having Creole blood to taste any longer. Killing and whom to kill is a gourmet choice for him rather than a moral one, although, as Louis points out in the novel, "all aesthetic decisions are moral, really" (Rice 67). Therefore, the film introduces a potential moral component to Lestat, too, one that is largely absent from the novel but explored in the rest of the *Vampire Chronicles*. Lestat is often presented as a

² All transcripts of the film script are done by myself.

true villain because other components that complicate his character in the novel, like his blind father that he has to care for and the ambivalent relationship that he has with him, are absent in the film. The versatile acting portrays him as “a cultured bisexual vampire with an inappropriate and sometimes even sick and morbid humour [...who] speaks in a calm and manipulative voice that is at the same time seductive and sarcastic” (Schäfer 94-95).

Claudia (Kirsten Dunst) becomes quite a different character in the film than in the novel. Although still an evil child vampire, her coldness and inhumanity that is very often referred to in the novel is not portrayed as consistently in the film. Most importantly, the significant insights about her lack of conscience and human nature are missing. Instead, the film plays with her appearance much more than the novel is able to. With film being a visual medium, the viewer is unable to forget the other aspect that determines her existence and suffering in both works: her physical appearance – her mature character stuck in a child’s body. Her innocent physical features and expressions are presented in stark contrast to her murderous actions, especially when feeding or killing Lestat. The family dynamics that are portrayed here are oftentimes shown to be ironic and humorous, but carry a dark morbid undertone. Claudia grows up to be a spoiled child and, later, a spoiled woman in the body of a child, who is used to getting whatever she wants and is truly insatiable. For instance, she kills a seamstress who is working on her dress, or the piano teacher who annoys her by correcting her too much (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Claudia and her dead piano teacher.



Fig. 2 Claudia's artistic progress.

Her frustration grows over time and even leads to her hiding a dead woman among her dolls simply because she envies the feminine endorsements that she will never possess. While

it is easy to forget that she is still a ‘child’ in the novel due to the way she behaves, the film does not allow for this negligence. Claudia’s growing maturity is shown mainly in her artistic progress (Fig. 2), and her inability to change is shown when she, with what seems to be typical teenage defiance, attempts to cut her hair and it grows back immediately (Fig. 3a-b).



Fig. 3a Claudia cuts her hair in defiance.



Fig. 3b Claudia’s hair grows back immediately.

Claudia’s prime vampire nature is shown during her turning and the scenes that follow it. Similar to the novel, she awakens with the insatiable hunger of a child and is portrayed as innocent, not quite understanding what she is doing when feeding on humans. The progress in refining her ways of killing is shown in the successive, rather humorous scenes mentioned above. Unlike the novel’s Claudia, who becomes a cold, reserved character, the film portrays her with a typical teenage rage once she gets dissatisfied with her existence and her body, but after Louis explains the conditions of her turning she grows colder and more calculated, which results in her killing Lestat. Her childish innocence is maintained in her mannerisms. She hugs Louis and Lestat frequently, but starts to behave more adult once they are in Paris; an impression partly conveyed through her hairstyle and the way she dresses. Still, she is a much more emotional character in the film than in the novel.

The final and dominant manner in which vampire nature is exemplified is through the characters’ appearances especially when they feed on humans, which is the one act essential to their understanding of the world; it makes up the core of their identities. In these scenes, the film often breaks the fourth wall, with the actors staring directly at the spectator and thus communicating the direct erotic danger of the act (Fig. 4a-c). In both novel and film, then, killing is very much sexualised, and the whole turning ritual is characterised by an erotic aura,

because “[t]he male sexual penetration of the victim (with the phallic-substitute fangs) is followed by the more archetypal female nurturing of the victim, feeding him or her blood from the vampire’s body” (Benefiel 262). Lestat’s victims are mainly women who moan in pleasure when bitten, unaware of their impending death. The performance of the Théâtre des Vampires includes the actual killing of a woman who is undressed first, which further sexualises the process (Fig. 5). The last shot of Louis depicts him as monstrous and inhuman, too (Fig. 6). The film’s last vampire impression is conveyed by Lestat, who feeds on the reporter in a scene that is absent from the novel and, listening to Louis’s tape, discredits him: “Still whining, Louis. Have you heard enough? I’ve had to listen to that for centuries.”



Fig. 4a Lestat feeding on a tavern wench.



Fig. 4b Claudia feeding on her first victim.



Fig. 4c Armand feeding on a victim on stage.



Fig. 5 The Théâtre des Vampires with their victim.



Fig. 6 Louis attacks the reporter.

Conclusion

Today's vampires show a large potential for introspection, and although their identity is essentially tied to the process of killing, the way this identity is executed largely depends on their conscious position within a conventional moral framework, i.e. either adhering to it in Louis's case or rejecting it in Armand's or Lestat's case. However, complete mortal innocence leads, in Claudia's case, to an identity that is excluded from all moral standards and that can be classified as the pure, instinctual vampire nature: killing. Claudia's case in particular is an interesting one since the popular 'innocent virgin' trope of gothic fiction is used and turned around for the creation of ultimate horror. The novel portrays this much more clearly than the film, which conveys this point largely by visually contrasting her innocent appearance and the horrifying actions that she carries out. These four vampires are the ones that truly matter in this novel; the rest of the Parisian vampire coven is eliminated because they are too decadent and superficial.

In the *Vampire Chronicles*, then, "[e]vil is both repulsive and fascinating, to be avoided and to be immersed in. This unresolved ambivalence is a recurrent theme" (Lieberman 109). This ambivalence is one that contemporary society, with a rising interest in the gradations of evil and a current abundance of fascinating villains, is strongly immersed in as well. In the academic context, too, there is a rising interest in dealing specifically with this matter. The highly eroticised evil and moral conflict surrounding both human and vampire existence may be one of the main attractions of this type of contemporary vampire gothic fiction. Indeed, contemporary society consciously demands the introspective dark vampire hero instead of the ancient Dracula type, which is set apart strongly from humanity and although sophisticated and intelligent, is presented as horrible and animalistic. Rice expresses this clearly in her hidden commentary on gothic fiction through Louis: "We had met the European vampire, the creature of the Old World. He was dead" (Rice 173).

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