John Polidori, "The Vampyre"

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Biography

(1795-1821)

John William Polidori was born September 7th, 1795 in London. His father was an Italian scholar and his mother, an English governess. At age 19, he was one of the youngest graduates of medicine from the University of Edinburgh. In April of 1816 at age 21, he began traveling with Lord Byron as his physician and recorder of the journey. After returning from the journey, "The Vampyre" was accidentally published in April 1819 without Polidori's knowledge, under Byron's name. Polidori later corrected the error through a newspaper editorial. In August 1821, Polidori committed suicide by cyanide, or prussic acid. He, like his former employer Byron, had accumulated an insurmountable amount of gambling debt. Despite his family's acceptance of the cause of death, it was widely reported in the newspapers that Polidori "died by the visitation of God."

Other works:

Ernestus Berchtold; or The Modern Oedipus: A Tale (1819)
Xinemenes, The Wreath and Other Poems (1819)
The Diary of Dr. John William Polidori (1816)
The Fall of the Angels: A Sacred Poem (1821)
"The Vampyre", written by John Polidori, was actually first attributed to Lord Byron after having his conference at Geneva with Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin (Shelley’s future wife) along with several other notable figures. Lord Byron initially had hired John William Polidori as a personal physician that travelled alongside him in his travels. At the Geneva convention, while everyone was writing their ghost stories, John Polidori was also at work on his own. When Byron became bored of his own work Polidori borrowed his idea and came up with this tale. Polidori, having a terrible relationship with his employer, took Byron’s original idea and changed it around making it more of a caricature of Byron. It was eventually mistakenly published under Byron’s name.

Although many critics in the time would disagree "The Vampyre" was actually a huge success. Many reviews at the time, such as the Edinburgh Monthly Review, did not take kindly to such a mistake. Many reviewers took the extract of the letter from Geneva, included as a preface to "The Vampyre", as a way to humiliate and degrade Lord Byron for writing, as the reviewer states it, "a filthy tale". This "preface" was used as a way to attribute the writing to Lord Byron when in fact there is no mention of Byron or the story itself. Even the opening paragraph of "The Vampyre" suggests that the work was done by some other author by the unknowledgeable description of the city of Athens. The reviewer suggests that Byron, having spent many years on and off in Athens, would not have made these errors regarding the landscape of Athens and its surrounding areas. All of this was for the sake of "saving" Byron’s reputation.
WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

This story centers around the relationship Lord Strongmore evokes with women; however, there are very few situations where the women are given a voice or even a name. In the beginning, the narrator describes mothers of eligible daughters and ladies as "hunters" seeking out the aristocratic Strongmore out of curiosity and a determination to win over such a mysterious figure. When the two most notable women, Ianthe and Miss Aubrey, are approached they are given names, but very little agency. They are seduced, just like many others. Comparitively, the story is clearly an allegory for sexual seducing, but also of rape. In the case of Ianthe, a violent encounter is outwardly displayed as aggressive and overtaking force. The strong sexual connotations are outlined by Ianthe's parents who describe the vampire's "orgies" in the forest. By the 18th and 19th centuries, these events were known as "an occasion of feasting and revelry, especially one characterized by excessive drinking and indiscriminate sexual activity" (OED). The quietness of the encounters and the women's subsequent admittance in many cases create the allegory for the vampire. In this story, the monster is otherworldly, but what makes him monstrous are his attacks.

Ianthe is another example of women's powerlessness in the story. She is described as a "frank, infantile being," echoing the familiar themes of the child bride in Victorian times (46). She is attractive to Aubrey because of her innocence but remains unaware of Aubrey's advances. It is almost as if her innocence is that of ignorance as the fact that she is uneducated and foreign is reiterated several times. Despite being the one who introduces Aubrey to the idea of the vampire and her knowledge of their actions and locations, Ianthe becomes the victim. Miss Aubrey, too, is apparently blinded by Strongmore's seduction and "power." It is likely that, given the number of women that Strongmore exposed through sexual conquests, he would have a reputation that Miss Aubrey would have some indication to. But as with the entire story, the women are completely unable to withstand a man's sexual advances in the form of powerful seduction. They are portrayed not so much as victims, but those who gave in to vice and desires.

BETRAYAL

After Aubrey becomes friends with Lord Strongmore and accompanies him in travelling, Aubrey finds himself in numerous instances where he feels the need to betray. These betrayals begin to occur at the same time Aubrey starts to question Lord Strongmore's true character; this happens after Aubrey secretly prevents Strongmore's rendezvous with the daughter of a lady whose house he often visited. After the prevention, Aubrey abandons Strongmore and travels by himself to Greece.

He betrays Ianthe, who warns him not to travel through the forest during the night, as it is believed to be "the resort of the vampyres in their nocturnal orgies" (47). He promises Ianthe he won't go when it is dark, but his occupation in his research makes him forget about when the sun sets; thus, he ends up travelling through the forest too late and the vampire kills Ianthe.

After Ianthe's death, Aubrey is reconciled with Lord Strongmore. They resume their travels together and are attacked by robbers. Strongmore is shot, but before he dies, he makes Aubrey swear an oath. Aubrey's oath is to not impart his knowledge of Strongmore's crimes and death for a year and a day. However, when Aubrey returns home to England, he notices Lord Strongmore is still alive. The lordship continually reminds Aubrey of his oath, causing Aubrey to become mentally distressed. Aubrey's anxiety worsens and he wishes he could reveal the monster's secret. Due to the consequences of his previous betrayals, Aubrey forces himself to keep his oath. Unfortunately, Aubrey's sister marries Lord Strongmore, who ends up killing her.
The vampire does not take betrayal lightly. He avenges Aubrey for his betrayals and does not give Aubrey an option in regards to the oath; he sets up a “double-edge sword” scenario. That is, if Aubrey breaks his oath, the vampire will avenge him for it, but if he doesn’t break his oath, he will already have murdered Aubrey’s sister. This scenario instills suspense in the reader due to Polidori’s creation of a relentless, sinister villain.

AMBIGUITY

Whether or not there is a vampire in The Vampyre is not as clear cut as the title would suggest. There is evidence to suggest that there is or isn’t a vampire. The ambiguity stems from Aubrey’s deteriorating mental condition, a deterioration that he acquired during his first encounter with what he assumes to be a vampire.

“Aubrey being put to bed was seized with a most violent fever, and was often delirious; in these intervals he would call upon Lord Strongmore and upon Ianthe—by some unaccountable combination he begged of his former companion to spare the being he loved. At other times he would imprecate maledictions upon his head, and curse him as her destroyer.”

It is this moment in the text that first suggests that Aubrey’s memory is not to be trusted. In this moment Aubrey seems to be unable to remember if Ianthe has been killed or is still endanger from the vampire. During Aubrey’s recovery, the text tells us that “Lord Strongmore chanced at this time to arrive in Athens.” The text gives us reasons to believe that Lord Strongmore was not present in Athens when Aubrey encounters the vampire, but it also gives evidence to support Lord Strongmore’s vampirism such as his return from death, although his death is never seen.

VICE AND VIRTUE

Virtue is defined as the conformity of one’s life and conduct to moral and ethical principles; uprightness; rectitude. With the Victorian Age being the successor to the Romantic Era, we often see the remnants of some of the ideas that were prominent of the Romantic Era included in the Victorian Age. The term virtue, and the idea of a person being virtuous, is one that can be seen lingering throughout the years. Authors of the Romantic Era such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Schiller, and Lord Byron often wrote of characters aiming to achieve a “virtuous state” in order to be a well-rounded, appropriate human being in all ways possible. Since we know John William Polidori’s The Vampyre: A Tale originates from a work of Lord Byron’s, there is no question that there is a definite inclusion of vice and virtue.

There are several mentions of both vice and virtue in The Vampyre: A Tale, most of which pertain to women. The idea runs parallel to the theme that women of the time should be proper, pure, and whole. The importance of women being virtuous and pure is focused around those ladies in which Lord Strongmore pursues. Originally, we perceive that he pursues them as companions and that sexual affection is his goal. It is not until later in the story we can infer that Lord Strongmore is actually attracted to the pure woman because of his thirst for blood. The pure of heart and soul is seen as the ideal choice for the vampire of this time which in a way sets a standard for the future. Vice and virtue are two themes that are important in the story not only because the attainment of virtue was a common desire of the time but also for the fact that the recognition of the pure of heart establishes targets throughout the story for Lord Strongmore, or the “vampire” himself.
“...all those females whom he had sought, apparently on account of their virtue, had, since his departure, thrown even the mask aside, and had not scrupled to expose the whole deformity of their vices to the public view” (43).

This quote represents much of the sexual shame brought on upon the conquests of Lord Strongmore. By defiling their virtue and leaving them, he shames them. It stands as a mark of his seduction, that he is also able to leave the women feeling as if it is their fault and their disgrace. There are familiar overtones in contemporary stories of seduction and sexuality where the woman is often expected to prove any wrongdoing. Here, too, is the only clear example in the story of the women having any voice of reaction to the seduction. There are no cases in which Strongmore is blamed outright or a woman accuses him. He remains largely untouched throughout the story despite the seemingly obvious implications his behavior elicits. The women, alternatively, are disregarded after they've been victimized, rarely given agency during or after the event.

Discussion Questions:

Do you think Polidori is representing a critique on this type of behavior? Clearly Strongmore is monstrous under his creation, but given the women's marginal role and indeed, “hunter”-like impulses, who is Polidori suggesting at fault?

Do you believe in the allegory of seducer and rapist? Is this simply one facet of a supernatural creature or is the vampire a way to describe a person who commits such a crime?

“Struck with the idea that he left by his absence the whole of his friends, with a fiend amongst them, of whose presence they were unconscious, he determined to enter again into society, and watch him closely, anxious to forewarn, in spite of his oath, all whom Lord Strongmore should approach with intimacy. But when he entered into a room, his haggard and suspicious looks were so striking, his inward shudderings so visible, that his sister was at last obliged to beg of him to abstain from seeking, for her sake, a society, which affected him so strongly” (55-56).

This quote sums up Aubrey’s stressful situation, in which he battles with his mind as to whether or not he should break his oath. He wishes he could reveal the secret, but he can’t make himself do it. However, his visible “inward shudderings” and “haggard and suspicious looks” reveal that he’s hiding some sort of secret. Aubrey’s sister believes his behaviors to be part of his illness, so she begs him to stay away from the society that affects him.

Discussion Questions:

What does the theme of betrayal reveal about Aubrey’s and Lord Strongmore’s character? Why is it so easy for Aubrey to betray his friends in the first half of the story, but is so difficult in breaking his oath toward the end? Does his refusal to break his oath contribute to his death?

What do you think would have happened if Aubrey breaks his oath before the year and one day passes? Does Lord Strongmore put Aubrey in a “double-edged sword” situation?

“His incoherence became at last so great, that he was confined to his chamber. There he would often lie for days, incapable of being roused. His body had become emaciated; his eyes had attained a glassy luster; ---the only sign of affection and recollection remaining displayed itself upon the entry of his sister” (56).

At this point in the story the distrust of the narrator is at its peak. Aubrey has been attacked, suffered a violent fever, attacked by robbers, his companion has died and he believes has come back to life. He is so delusional that he is not allowed to leave his house and a doctor is called to monitor him. The text suggests he has restrained from eating suggested by his “emaciated” state. How can a person who has lost so much body fat that he is considered to be emaciated be trusted as a narrator? His body and mind were suffering equally. Perhaps even the word “lie” serves a double meaning in this quote. A reader must humor the notion that Aubrey has crafted this vampire story in his mind based on his observance of Lord Strongmore’s effect on women and his protective instincts for his sister.
Discussion Questions:

When are the moments in the text in which we are given clear evidence of Lord Strongmore’s vampirism without the cloud of sickness, mental breakdown, and delusion?

Are we given the story from Aubrey’s point of view, or from that of an unbiased narrator?

“It had been discovered, that his contempt for the adulteress had not originated in hatred of her character; but that he had required to enhance his gratification that his victim, the partner of his guilt, should be hurled from the pinnacle of unsullied virtue, down to the lowest abyss of infamy and degradation: in fine, that all those females whom he had sought, apparently on account of their virtue, had, since his departure, thrown even the mask aside, and had not scrupled to expose the whole deformity of their vices to the public view” – pg 43

What this quote displays is how Lord Strongmore enjoys (“enhances gratification”) the fact that the women are ruined of their virtuous state. The ever so important untouched and untainted fashion of life in which women of this time are intended to live is completely changed by an encounter with Lord Strongmore. The quote goes so far as to say that the women are even ashamed and afraid to reveal their actions, or “vices”, with Lord Strongmore whereas Lord Strongmore himself holds no fear of doing so. The quote also demonstrates how Lord Strongmore enjoys choosing his women, or prey, by their virgin or virtuous state only to inevitably destroy both.

Discussion Questions:

With the role of women evolving over the years and a “virtuous state” no longer being of utmost importance, how do you think the character of Lord Strongmore would change?

Or, do you feel that the women of today being “virtuous” is still important? Why or why not?

Character List

Lord Strongmore/Earl of Marsden: A British aristocrat with “dead grey eyes” who always gazes at his surroundings with a looks that people find peculiar. People, especially women, are attracted to his characteristics and try to engage his attention to them. He is also the vampire and gluts his thirst for blood by seducing young, attractive women and biting their necks. He is able to use moonlight to bring himself back to life after the robbers kill him.

Aubrey: a young gentleman and an orphan with a sister in the possession of great wealth. His parents died while he was in childhood and grew up with guardians. He is handsome, rich, and full of candor. Before meeting Lord Strongmore, he has a strong sense of pride, but this pride diminishes when he becomes mentally disturbed over Strongmore. He dies due to his anxiety and mental instability caused by Lord Strongmore/the vampire.

Ianthe: a young, beautiful greek woman whom Aubrey meets after abandoning Strongmore. She begs Aubrey to not travel through the nearby forest at night, but after he disobeys, the vampire kills her before Aubrey has the chance to prevent the murder.

Aubrey’s sister: she cares for the health of her brother; she ends up marrying the vampire, who changed his name to Earl of Marsden after his “moonlight resuscitation.”
Vampires in Many Forms

The Romantic Vampire

Vampires have existed in folklore long before The Vampyre, but these vampires differed greatly from the vampires we know today, which draw their inspiration from the romantic notion of the vampire that Polidori illustrated. The vampires, or creatures similar to vampires, of ancient folklore existed in many cultures. They were usually depicted as bloated with dark purple skin from drinking blood, and lived in their graves. This is vastly different from the vampire depicted by Polidori, a vampire who lives in high society, has pale skin, and is very seductive. Although the romantic vampire is not seated in folk traditions, it has proven to be more prominent in literature and other media.

Vampirism as 'Otherness'

In Polidori's story, Lord Strongmore is predominately concentrated on female victims. Yet it is Aubrey whose blood vessel bursts in the end of the story, a clear connection to the vampire's infamous bite. This seems to indicate a common theme in vampiric history. Sexually (through the allegory of an exchange of fluids) and otherwise, the vampire often seems to stand in for many outliers of society, including homosexual tendencies, powerful women, even mysterious and reclusive characters. The terror of the unknown and the unpopular often casts vampires in a violent and monstrous role. Only recently has the vampire seemed to begin to acquire gentler qualities with the onset of such series as the romantic Twilight and True Blood.

Additional Resources:

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Vampires Through the Ages
**Vlad Tepes or Vlad Dracul**
Ruled during 1400’s and was target inspiration for Vampires

**Polidori Vampyre Etching**
Etching in 1819 of a John Polidori Vampyre

**Dracula: 1958 Film**
Image comes from the 1958 film which was inspired by Bram Stoker’s 1897 Novel

**Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror**
Depiction of 1922 in a silent film by Henrik Galeen (Inspired by Stoker)

**New Age: Twilight**
Newest, most popular, Robert Pattinson as Edward
Works Cited


Additional Information
*On Polidori:*

*On Byron:*

*Media:*
Original Editorial by Polidori Clarifying Authorship of 'The Vampyre'
Another example of the woman vampire. Edvard Munch's 'Vampire' 1893-94

*Online Version of 'The Vampyre':*
Project Gutenberg

*Online Quiz*
"The Vampyre" Plot Quiz

What Character Are You?