

2001

Once Upon the Sleeping Canon: Literary Lustre in Cradle of Filth's Wintry Romances

Julio Angel Olivares Merino
University of Jaen (Spain)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Olivares Merino, Julio Angel (2001) "Once Upon the Sleeping Canon: Literary Lustre in Cradle of Filth's Wintry Romances," *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.70013/39t0u1v2

Available at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol3/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Research Commons at Kutztown University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Dracula Studies by an authorized editor of Research Commons at Kutztown University. For more information, please contact czerny@kutztown.edu.

Once Upon the Sleeping Canon: Literary Lustre in Cradle of Filth's Wintry Romances

Cover Page Footnote

Julio Angel Olivares Merino, University of Jaen (Spain) is a writer, poet and musician whose areas of research include vampire myths, aesthetics, semiotics, and the gothic.

Once Upon the Sleeping Canon: Literary Lustre in Cradle of Filth's Wintry Romances

Julio Angel Olivares Merino

[Julio Angel Olivares Merino, University of Jaen (Spain) is a writer, poet and musician whose areas of research include vampire myths, aesthetics, semiotics, and the gothic.]

“Doamne, apara-ma de Dracu”
(adapted from a Romanian tombstone)

“I see scars on my body
I see scars in my heart
I should never have trusted
You survive on Blood”
 (“Carmille” [Addiction] from *Angels of Mourning Silence* by 13 Candles)

Constantly unearthed – dilated, parodied and decomposed – for decades, Dracula has been reborn several times only to be dispossessed of his power in self-proclaimed assaults on his very foundations. Especially in the experiments of realistic and socially rationalized horror, vampires have been deprived of their mythic and figurative aureole – a demise into oblivion and fossilisation, “conversion from ‘it is something like’ to ‘it is’” (Kirwan 31). They have been turned into psychic sponges, marginalized psychopaths, satanic cultists, even runaway teenagers, all representing the widespread chaos and dementia that dominated the last decades of the twentieth century.

The gothic wave, with its dark individual delicacies of nostalgia and its poetics of nihilism, offers an alternative journey towards the inner primitive. Stemming from vacancy, a summoning of self-assurance and foregrounding of the spirit is enhanced by impalpable initiations into validation and immortality. Providing aesthetic deliveries of solemn and depressed monologues which result from repulsive and narcissistic cognitions within the ego, the gothic trend or milieu immediately turned into a lifestyle whose conventions and maxims were revealed in cult magazines of a dark sensitivity born in the mid seventies into the sinister and rebellious side of the postpunk era, ghastly effigies and monotone-dripping mysanthropy. Elite groups from a British first generation such as Ultravox, Gary Numan, The Damned, Bauhaus (who proclaimed Lugosi's eternal enthronement in their song “Bela Lugosi's Dead”) or Siouxsie and the Banshees, crowned the aesthetics of the ethereal and silhouetted deviant existence, tragic splendour, the crawling hymn of those marginated “goths” enacting what Brendan Perry, from Dead Can Dance, defined as “a subtle transformation of something dead into something living – the transformation of inanimacy into animacy.” Continuing through the 1980s with the charisma of bands such as Sisters of Mercy, Depeche Mode, The Shroud, London After Midnight and Dead Can Dance, it underwent a revival during the 1990s with the stylishly vampiric influences seen in such groups as 13 Candles or Type O Negative. But the main concern of this paper is with the extreme delirium into which this style branched out in the last decade of the twentieth century. Beyond the subtle and murmuring veils of Goth, these chants reveal an atmospheric illness of the soul. While definitely influenced by vampiric themes, they derive not from Dracula himself but primarily from Anne Rice's revolutionary reinterpretation of the myth.

Going beyond Gothic to follow its contemporary and simultaneous lines of evolution implies entering the translucent realms of gothic metal, its most direct heir, as well as other shocking and more subversive offsprings and mutations. The focus here will be on the subset known as black metal and its evolution in the early 1990s, initiated by Cradle of Filth and embracing bands such as Ancient, Agathodaimon and Abyssos.

Let us briefly trace the constants that define the corpora of Cradle of Filth's lyrics, songs which like many other popular texts (such as horror fiction, comics, graffiti one-liners and even the language of advertising) are rarely given canonical attention, yet offer a major manifestation of alternative ideologies in conjunction with a presentation of more classical modes. The reason for such dismissiveness lies in the application of a fixed evaluative system. In *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of Literature*, Montgomery notes that "Value ... is seen as a quality residing within texts themselves. Critics of this persuasion have stressed the importance of characteristics such as complexity, aesthetic unity, literary language, serious subject matter and participation within the literary tradition" (240). Operating under such constraints certainly leads to a search for well-structured, coherent and cohesive texts that employ carefully selected language with figurative echoes, couched in elegant and aesthetic style. As for the subject matter, it is expected to be "generally serious, dealing with philosophical topics of acknowledged importance" (241). Shakespeare's works, for example, "are deemed valuable because they are believed to have significance not only for his time but for all time" (241).

To test the validity of these systematic prejudices, consider these two verses:

a. And every fair from fair sometimes declines
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

b. There she stands by the chamber door,
even more beautiful than ever before.
Back from the dead, a mistress once adored,
just imagine what those eyes have explored.
Like the rain saltwater dripping onto the wooden
floor.

...

Her body felt so cold of sin, kissed her just
before rigor mortis set in
Her flesh was chill as ice ... still I caressed her
frigid form yet thrice.

Both excerpts deal with traditional motifs that go back to the classics: death and immortality. Both use connotative and figurative language, though with contrasting attitudes towards the universal themes. The first approach appeals directly, in a confessional tone, to a seemingly present addressee who arises to eventually fade in a transfer of glory to poetry, with immortality presented as the magic agent that endows the maiden with eternal life through poetry. The second approach also deals with the rapture of eternity as a counterpoint to the ravages of death, though with more vivid imagery of the female referent, a dead (or undead) diva. Predictably, if one applies the aforementioned criteria, the first (excerpted from a Shakespearean sonnet) would be classified as valued poetry, while the second (from "Firebreathing Whore" from Abyssos's 1999 album *Fhinsthanian Nightbreed*) would be discarded. Is such a division justifiable? The answer would be no, specially if we consider literary traits are not to be intrinsically found within texts, but are, as Iser acknowledges (3-41), ulteriorly generated in the process of reading.

To counteract this misconception about the distinctiveness and autonomous essence of literature, we need to examine Cradle of Filth's music and lyrics, the collisions of which reveal hidden literary seeds. Melodic and harmonic black metal is usually distinguished by the prominence of its atmospheric keyboarded core, its inclusion of such colorful elements as female vocals, acoustic guitars in ancestral

arpeggio murmurs. In general, the complex compositional labyrinths with the integration of layering moods articulate a dominant motif-melody (what is often called “riff salad”) similar to the patterns in classical music where drifting movements rise from central melodies. Its polyphony of seductive needles fictionally punctures deep into one’s heart to free us from mortal dogmas, to heal our insanities, and to endow us with introspection and nihilist reintegration.

Needles like fangs, eternal life like the gift of vampirism. A succumbing spirit into dissolution and cataclysm rebukes in Cradle’s music like a harsh lightning, a profound sensual embrace of meditation. This innerdrama beats as a syncopation of the soul coming to terms with destiny, both from the mortal and the immortal perspectives. Interior monologues bathe, in a healing trance, the collapsing memories and the arising of twisted ideals. Their harmonic black metal constitutes the dirge of revenants, its carcass-like overall oneiric ambient – a hull of epic shroud, the smoothness of the vampire’s transferred tenderness – being mingled with the tempestuous and vertiginous hammering progression of breathless notes, wolving woven guitars, war like strumming percussion and accentuated bass viscosity. The singleness of effect mesmerizes the listener and catches him/her in a tempting equation with eternity, just like the vampire’s haunting.

Cradle of Filth’s dreams are nothing but episodes of symphonic darkness built around bizarre fast-picking layering of atonal phrases. Freaky events of the unreal unfold in phases of gloomy vampiric victimization, opening up a path towards illusion. From the scarlet aurora of this vortex, the core of which is an altar of madness and beauty, vocals – the most salient layer – usually emerge as hovering truth offering the sinister wording. Its high-pitched touching, beyond the savage growling poetics of thrash metal and the feral yell of punk rock that “seem to want to refuse the perfection of the ‘amplified’ voice” (Shuker 159) – generally have perpetual shelter in the receptor’s decoding trance.

The consensus is that Cradle of Filth is the genesis of the melodic vein within black metal. Founded in 1991 in Britain and infused with the folklore of the Isles, the band, led by charismatic Dani Filth, presenting themselves as languid and gaunt fictionalized vampires, have endowed the myth with new insight, recovering faded lustre from the Hammer texts as they come to terms anew with the monster. Their lyrics are impregnated by the macabre voyeurism and iconography of vampirism, and show the influence of the hallmarks of vampire literature – Burger, Goethe, Byron, Coleridge, Southey, Le Fanu and Stoker – and the folklore of Nietzsche and Summers. The result is an opulently ambient music which produces a voracious, numbing spell. Unearthing alternative universes of enchantment while evoking forbidden passions of the self, Cradle of Filth have delineated the path for a future that is our past, while constructing a dimension of mythological and ancestral signifiers that demand interpretation.

In their ghastly and poetic operas reminiscent of Baudelaire, love appears as the absolute and primal evil. While sublime passion reigns over repression, blood and semen spell the spasms of romance between predator and prey. Dark, polished imaginings prevail over signs of pleasure, and the unpredictable chaining of melodies break conventional schemes of parallelism and repetition, yet are coherently embedded in a synth-based instrumental core. Cradle of Filth’s slogan is “Those who trespass against us, Beware the Shadows of Dusk.” These nocturnal posers have adopted curious nicknames: sepulchral voice (Dani), Nocturnal Pulse (Robin), Impaler Troop Movement (Nicholas), Flesh upon razor wire (Stuart), Funereal Dirge (Jafred Demeter), Poenarian Fugue and choir (Damien). Accompanying studio female vocalists include Danielle, Rachel, Sarah (“the tortured orgasm chorus”) and their iconic divas or lamiai – Lady Jezebel Deva (“Dulcet Ghostly Song”) and Cneajna (“Seducer of Ravens and Angels”).

Cradle’s discourses usually concentrate on the vampiress’s body as an object of desire, an architecture of elaborately projected male pleasures, fetishized by a display of stylized gestures, an over-representation of femininity eliciting a male heterosexual response. In “The Forest Whispers my Name”, the deep enchanting grove is presented as an Eden for witches and vampires, sexual intercourse being “the principle made flesh”, as the title of their first album reads. First there is a mimicry of passion:

I sip the blood-red wine
My thoughts weigh heavy with the fountain of time

From knowledge drunk from the fountain of life
From Chaos born out of love and the scythe
The forest beckons with her nocturnal call
To pull me close amid the baying of wolves
Where the bindings of Christ are downtrodden with scorn
In the dank, odoriferous earth

Then follows a generous, idyllic and romantic outpouring, a passionate consummation:

We embrace like two lovers at death
A monument to be trapping of breath
As restriction is bled from the veins in my neck
To drop roses on my marbled breast
I lust for the wind and the flurry of leaves
And the perfume of flesh on the murderous breeze
To learn from the dark and the voices within

Like Baudelaire's vampiress, the Queen of Winter proudly acclaim her majesty and supremacy in vampiric iconography that works distinctively with literary tradition and history – consequently, testing our "literary competence" (Culler):

Iniquitous
I share Carmilla's mask
A gaunt mephitic voyeur
On the black side of the glass
Peering through the mirror
Deep dark and ominous
Consorting themes, demons I weave
Subservience from thee to lust

I am Corinthian light
A snake in flowers by night
The last temptation of Christ
Evil in mortal . . .
Lure me panthered Faustia
With cunt and veiled womb
To prowl thy inner sanctum walls
In Tirgoviste to resume
Control
("Queen of Winter, throned")

Her dark seductions, the residue of chaos and destruction, are sheltered in lines of oblique parables woven by a cryptic rendering of dark motherhood, much in the tradition of Burger. As Cradle's music is rooted in masculinity and its voyeuristic imagination, the female curiously becomes a symbol of domination, with man turned into a helpless slave to her opulent eroticism. Orchestration with cello and violins articulates the sinister feeding, while lyrics abide in intertextuality:

Seduction, my obsessive art
A pantheon of tragedies inscribed upon the stars
Like thistled ruin, garbed around my heart
Bacchanal Cinderella, desirous midnight passed

Leaving thee as sacrifice asleep within my arms
'Midst dreams of robed temptation versed in sexual aftermath
When we web as tides together, carnal souls entwined
And orgasms expire, come puppets wire and the blind
Fires work in me
A lithe supremacy
I tear asunder heaven as I would all enemies
Impaler Lord
...
I am thirst, spearheaded hunger
Sacrament and pain
Nails raked in savagery

Love is a whisper, a lost name and promise on the lips of the longing lover who, in the trance of nostalgia and in complicity with animalistic nature, awaits the return of the dead beloved. In "Nocturnal Supremacy" Rorasa echoes Gautier's aristocratic Clarimonde:

Weak midnight promises of love
were wept upon her grave
and shunned by stars above.
In mortal life lurks my dismay
and Angel stole my heart
and Death took her away

This wail reminds us also of Romualdo's necrophilic projections over Brunhilda's tomb in Tieck's "Wake Not the Dead" as well as of the entombed nightmares of Poe's narrator in "Ligeia". The savage bride, like Lucy's appealing mask of revitalized essence once vampirized, comes back to be finally betrothed in a ceremony of bloody kisses ("Fear me not my grieving King/Funereal in breath/thus we shall cheat Death"), a tapestry of voluptuary decadence, an invitation to the secrecy of unlife.

In Cradle of Filth's album *Dusk and Her Embrace*, released for commercial purposes in a coffin-shaped edition, the vampire motif persists, although now the dark iconography and symbolism is less demonic. Rather, it strives for a highly sublimated romantic scent, both by means of intensely sensual lyrics and phantasmagoric music based on contrasts (variations of slow and fast tempo), as well as bizarre ambient stimuli mixed with very moving melodies. This atmospheric album stands as a dramatized ode to the exquisite fall of spirits into the abyss of night, with crescendos that remind us of the soundtracks of Hammer Films. In fact, one of the songs on this album – "Funeral in Carpathia" – shares its title with one of the tracks used in the film *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1969).

The discourse in *Dusk and Her Embrace* conforms to a pompous flickering of seductive candelabra, a perfect balance between shrieking effects and delicate impressions, inducing melancholic prey to the schizo moon. Harmonized vocals reap the soulless background, with intonations ranging from a high-end screech to a low and cavernous growl. In "Malice Through the Looking Glass", dusk is invoked as the night-breeding herald of eternity and the only escape from carrion crows:

Awaiting the sun to set, crimsoning seas
Only once it is dark doth my misery cease
"I am as dusk come to ravish the light"
Steal me from their stares and mute christ into night
"I will answer their prayers"
If thou wouldst drink of my life

Here one can sense Poe's nostalgia for the death of a beautiful woman as "the most poetical topic of the world" (126) and for melancholy as "the most legitimate of all the poetical tones" (484). The interwoven unity of emotions is that of despair that delights in self-torture, the languidity of the Sleeping Beauty, the feeding on an orgy of sensual darkness, reminiscent of Coleridge's Geraldine:

Obsession grips, blindragon fever
In throes of scythed orgasm, Eros dies
And Saturn rapes faith's lovelorn Diva
Upon a cyprean altar, stripped bare for sacrifice
...
The centuries of wait have all but gone
Behold dark beauty stirs to conquer on and on
("Beauty Slept in Sodom")

After the shattering of puritanical innocence, we see the imminent recreation of the loveliness of the dead, with its Shakespearean resonances:

Lucretia
is my love in vein
When thy tears bleed sweeter
than the midsummer rain?
...
Beauty slept and angels wept
For her immortal soul
in this repose, all evil chose
To claim her for their very own

Carpathia
The pleased dead speak of her
in necromantic tongue
when ambered daylights are done

Cradle of Filth summons us to an eternal lethargy of passions and enthralling emissions. They embellish the fetid cavity and revitalize the paleness of expiring emotions to unmask the netherworld of the senses. It is no accident that Ligeia's invitation to intimate marriage and macabre passion is carved on the packaging of lyrics: "Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." "Carmilla's Masque" encodes traces of Carmilla's sapience, her reading of fate, her "cruel love - strange love" (Le Fanu 101) in a blinding of conventions and an unearthing of the obscure fable. Basic instinct rather than patriarchal ideology dominates. In "A Gothic Romance", voyeurism and fantasizing in slow motion reach their peak:

Evening minuetto in a castle by the sea
A jewel more radiant than the moon
Lowered Her mask to me
The sublimest creature the gods, full of fire
Would marvel at making their Queen
infusing the air with Her fragrant desire
And my heart reeled with grave poetry

From grace I fell in love with Her
Scent and feline lure

And jade woodland eyes that ushered in the impurest
“Erotic, laden fantasies amid this warm autumn night
She lulled me away from the rich masquerade
And together we clung in the bloodletting moonlight”

...

Her icy kiss fevered my neck

...

This debauched seductress in black, took me

In “Dusk and Her Embrace,” in which the name Elizabeth is an oblique reminder of Coppola’s *Dracula*, another feverish marriage is mirrored against the chiming of midnight. Incandescent touch drips onto reddened ecstasy, evoked by reaping tempo as well as by the stabbing and staking allusions in its shadowed context. Here, the vampire’s fortunate victim reflects on the privilege of that final embrace:

When the sun has wept upon the waveless lake
And the mists steal in with ease

...

Know that I will escape from my death

Surrendered to the splendour of her sharpened caress

...

“Through twilight, darkness and moonrise
My scarlet tears will run
As stolen blood and whispered love
of fantasies undone”

...

Elizabeth

My heart is thine

Thy fragrant words

Warm within like wine...

...

Unfurl thy limbs breathless succubus

How the full embosomed fog

Imparts the night to us

Such conversion, vampirization by the cruel yet gorgeous female, appears again in the concluding section of “Gothic Romance”. Wildly on the obsessive hunt, tempted by an alliance with full moons soon to be born, the new vampire praises nightlife and its pleasures of reintegration:

In the pale azured dawn like Ligeia reborn

I tore free of my sleep - sepulchre

...

I am at once endeavoured to see her again

Stirring from midnight’s inertia

Knowing not even her name

Drunk on red wine, her dead lips on mine

Suffused with the perfume of night.

...

Lamia and Lemures

Spawned thee leche

to snare my flesh

...

Goddess of the graveyard, of the tempest and moon
in flawless fatal beauty her very visage compels

In the album *Cruelty and the Beast*, we find a metaphorical approach to the myth, with emphasis on the gloomy bliss and darkness of isolation, with binary masks of schizophrenia, social and mental dysfunction, drawing inspiration from real vampires such as Peter Kurten and Elizabeth Bathory. In “The Twisted Nails of Faith” and “Eyes that Witnessed Madness”, Cradle of Filth enters the psychopathic side of vampirism. Witchcraft, atavistic sexual configurations, unholy decadence and sordid narcissism are presented through oscillation of colours, dark pitches of insanity and a maddening tempo. “Thirteen Autumns and a Widow” reveals the awakening of a lost soul to a life of distorted virtue and twisted emotions:

Spawned wanton like blight on an auspicious night
Her eyes betrayed spells of the moon’s eerie light
A disquieting gaze forever ghosting far seas
Bled white and dead. Her true mother was fed.

...

Through the maw of the woods, a black carriage was drawn
Flanked by barbed lightning that hissed of the storm
(Gilded in crests of Carpathian breed)
Bringing slaves to the sodomic for the new-born
On that eve when the Countess’ own name came deformed
A tragedy crept to the name Bathory

...

She feared the light
So when She fell
Like a sinner to vice
Under austere, puritanical rule
She sacrificed
Her decorum as chaste
To this wolf of the cloth

...

Amongst philtres and melissas
Midst the grease of strangled men
And eldritch truths, elder ill-omen
Elizabeth came to life again

In “Cruelty Brought Thee Orchids”, lust screams for release as waves of tantalizing colour contrasts invoke insanity and the beast: “Madness came upon/Her like an amorous lover’s seed/Life blood splashed upon her skin/In gouts torture unleashed.” With its blood thirst and paranoia, the song is a hymn to pallor and degeneration:

Maleficent in dusky rose
Gathered satin lapped Her breasts
Like blood upon the snow
A tourniquet of topaz
Glistened at Her throat
Awakening, pulled from the tomb
Her spirit freed, eclipsed the moon

In “Bathory Aria”, narrator and epicentric character fuse in a unique entity. All is drawn upon a perfect homogeneous unity, with innovative layers that go beyond black metal’s original rude simplicity and rusty primitiveness, cute aggressiveness and bizarre conventions. Here we have a more receptive classical articulation of blurred nebula, epitomizing absolute liberation from ties to amateurish musical and literary incompetence to a fusion of genres and artistically forged imagery:

So ends this twisted fable’s worth
And though spared the pyre’s bite
By dint of nobled bloodlined birth
Her sins garnered Her no respite
...
The Spirits have all but fled judgement
I rot alone, insane,
Where the forest whispers puce laments for me
From amidst the pine and wreathed wolfsbane
Beyond these walls, wherein condemned
To the gloom of an austere tomb
I pace with feral madness sent

In the end, all that remains is the lick of carnivorous winds, as the narrator chants the undead Countess’s resurrection:

And we shall dance amid the ruin
As Adam and Evil

Dizzy at the falling stars
That burn fiercer in throes of upheaval.

Apocalypse is evoked in this rendez-vous with extinction, this siren’s tempestous dream, like funeral altered states and brief glimpses at inner graven sensations. So end at last the fairytales of lesbian fantasies, the rapes of flesh. As Cradle’s verse foreshadows “In an age crucified by the nails of faith/ When rank scarecrows of christ blighted lands” (“Eyes that Witnessed Madness”), the undead will recycle our ashes in bloodbaths to bring the compelling gift of immortality, a fading pulse with a chord of ambient existentialism touched with nihilism. The listener is taken into the web of blackened art in motion, the fertile dynamics of a homage to irresistible free will.

Works Cited

- Abyssos. *Fhinsthanian Nightbreed*. Cacophonous Records, 1999.
Cradle of Filth. *The Principle of Evil Made Flesh*. Cacophonous Records, 1994.
_____. *Vempire or Dark Faerytales in Phallestein*. Cacophonous Records, 1996.
_____. *Dusk and Her Embrace*. (Digipack Limited Edition CD). Music For Nations, 1996.
_____. *Dusk and Her Embrace*. (Coffin Limited Edition CD). Music For Nations, 1996.
_____. *Cruelty and the Beast*. Music For Nations, 1998.
Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.
Iser, W. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
Kirwan, J. *Literature, Rhetoric, Metaphysics*. London: Routledge, 1990.
Le Fanu, Sheridan. “Carmilla”. 1872. In Alan Ryan ed. *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*. London: Penguin, 1987.
Montgomery, M. et al. *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*. London: Routledge, 1992.
Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*. Ed David Galloway. London: Penguin, 1986.
Shuker, R. *Popular Music*. London: Routledge, 1994.