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Sex, Blood and (Un)Death: The Queer Vampire and HIV

Carlen Lavigne

“The taste of blood has grown foul in recent years.”
- *Sons of Darkness*, Introduction

Geraldine never had to ask if Christabel had been tested. Dracula was not concerned about Lucy’s transfusions. Even Louis and Lestat in the 1970s did not worry about the viruses they might be picking up from their victims. Nevertheless, the association between vampires and disease is not new. Nicola Nixon, for example, observes that “vampirism, with its connotative yoking of sexuality and contagion, has a long history of being linked to the horrors of venereal diseases – syphilis in particular” (118), while James Twitchell goes into more depth:

Two centuries ago many diseases were misdiagnosed as being the result of vampire activity: pernicious anemia, a blood disorder where the victim shrivels up, needing new red blood cells to survive; porphyria, in which the photophobic patient’s teeth and hair take on a fluorescent glow; tuberculosis, where the early symptoms are weight loss and the later coughing of blood; cholera, in which whole populations are slowly decimated; and, of course, the one still with us today, cancer. The most horrendous of all human decimations was the plague ... The cause was simply unknown then, and although we now know that the plague was carried to humans from rats via fleas, it was certainly more “logical” to use the time-tested explanation that had satisfied previous generations: the city was a victim of a vampire attack. (19)

The pale wasting of the vampiric victim was compared to any number of ailments. However, prior to the 1980s, any clear literary link between vampirism and disease was traditionally, if not subtle, at least somewhat subdued.

One might say the same for the link between the vampire and the queer (and by “queer” I mean gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, and all permutations thereof). From Geraldine and Christabel sharing a bed, to Dracula indirectly sucking the blood of almost every man in the book (Holmes 82), the queer has always been present in the vampire of English literature, where the act of feeding is typically portrayed as replacing or heightening sexual experience. Christopher Craft observes, “Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses ... the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive” (169). Clearly this sort of sexual confusion and the themes it entails lends itself easily to queer explorations. Indeed, Raven Kaldera’s *Predator* sports a lesbian vampire whose fangs emerge “as easily as a cock from its foreskin” (78).

But the vampire, its kinky bite representative of the erotic “other,” has traditionally been defeated by heterosexual heroes: in all his incarnations, Dracula falls again and again before Jonathan Harker. It was not until the works of Anne Rice, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and Fred Saberhagen in the 1970s that the genre broke with past stereotypes and gave rise to the new idea of a vampire protagonist – an idea that was subsequently embraced by authors in the queer

community, and illustrated by works such as Whitley Strieber's *The Hunger* (1981), Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), and the series of gay and lesbian vampire anthologies released by Cleis Press in the 1990s. As Sue Ellen Case notes, "The equation of hetero=sex=life and homo=sex=unlife generated a queer discourse that reveled in proscribed desiring by imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural, and the consequent other-than-living. In this discourse, new forms of being, or beings, are imagined through desire" (384). In short, either as a reaction to negativity or an expression of fantasy – or, in some cases, both – queer audiences delved liberally into the undercurrents of the genre, and re-imagined the vampire to suit their own needs. New types of vampires began proudly self-identifying by openly preferring the same sex, by participating in the gay community, by taking sexual pleasure from their feedings and, indeed, often by performing the "mortal" sexual act itself – in graphic detail.

The post-1980 emergence of blatantly queer vampirism is not surprising; in addition to the growing strength of the gay rights movement, blood was suddenly of paramount importance to gay and lesbian communities. With the discovery of HIV and AIDS, first associated with the lifestyles of gay men, blood became a source of horror not through images of splattered gore, but through the creeping threat of decay – and blood is the focus and sustaining drive of vampiric existence. The literary link between queer, undead and blood became juxtaposed onto the suddenly immediate links between queer, blood and HIV. Ellis Hanson is quite vehement in his revulsion for the subsequent renewed association of gay men with vampires:

Whether by strategy or error, the media have a commonplace tendency to collapse the category of "gay man" with that of "person with AIDS" within a convenient discourse of "high risk." In this way, myths about gay sex serve to amplify myths about AIDS; and so when I speak of the vampire as the embodiment of evil sexuality, I speak of gay men and people with AIDS in the same breath. I am talking about the irrational fear of PWAs and gay men who "bite." (325)

Hanson's view is not universally held; Poppy Z Brite credits HIV as a reason behind the resurgent popularity of the vampire in the late twentieth century, but she does not see the association as a negative one:

The vampire is a subversive creature in every way, and I think this accounts for much of his appeal. In an age where moralists use the fact that sex is dangerous to "prove" that sex is bad, the vampire points out that sex has *always* been dangerous. These days, if you wish to make love to someone without a layer of latex separating your most sensitive membranes, it becomes necessary to ask yourself, "Would I be willing to die a slow, lingering death for this person?" The answer may be yes – but for the vampire, it's not even an issue. He laughs in the face of safe sex, and he lives forever. (x)

It seems impossible that anyone living post-1982 could write about the act of blood drinking and avoid bringing up the subject of HIV – let alone gay and lesbian authors, for whose social communities the disease has had a profound impact. Angelia Wilson writes: "The AIDS crisis, which silenced many of our desires and added fervour to those remaining desires, was intensified

by the damning backlash not only from the New Right, but from most government officials, and legitimated by the medical community. Lesbians and gay men became the targets for moral outrage and the scapegoats for societal problems and political ideologies” (175). Horror fiction was a safe place for queer ideas to be explored; beneath the notice of the mainstream, the queer vampire performed in a nearly private theatre. Its historic themes of alienation, power, and unconventional eroticism made it an ideal plaything, while the traditional association of vampires with disease, and the new association of blood and death within contemporary gay consciousness, made the link with HIV inevitable.

Douglas Crimp, writing about seropositive gay men, says, “We have had to rebuild our devastated community and culture, reconstruct our sexual relationships, reinvent our sexual pleasure. Despite great achievements in so short a time and under such adversity, the dominant media still pictures us only as wasting deathbed victims; we have therefore had to wage a war of representation, too” (16). Nina Auerbach is equally concerned about the image of the post-HIV vampiric population:

Once the etiology of AIDS became clear, blood could no longer be the life; vampirism mutated from hideous appetite to nausea. AIDS bestowed nostalgic intensity on Anne Rice’s eternally young, beautiful, self-healing men, whose boredom with immortality looked like a heavenly dream to young men turned suddenly mortal. However diminished they became, Louis and Lestat were radiant exceptions to the vampires who shriveled in a plague-stricken, newly censorious culture. (175)

However, despite Auerbach’s assertions, reactions to the appearance of HIV were by no means unvaried. Crimp’s war of representation extends to and envelops the horror genre, and the association of the undead with queer or “unnatural” states of being: in the hands of queer authors, the vampire has been absorbed and transformed. Unlike the negative stereotyping of “vampire as gay man as disease” that Hanson objects to, many queer vampires deal with HIV in fresh, sensitive, and outright subversive ways.

In “Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow,” Pat Califa describes the first, horrified shock of a gay vampire who walks into a San Francisco leather bar in the early 1980s and discovers through psychic senses the extent of the new, mysterious illness about to decimate his prey:

All of these men were sick. Well, not all of them. Perhaps half a dozen were whole. But the rest would die sometime over the next year, mostly of pneumonia. Ulrich turned and almost ran for the door. He collided with the couple who had directed him to the Bear Cave, and knew for a fact that the master would barely have time to bury his boy before he himself was in the hospital, dying of an infection that was not supposed to be fatal, something he caught from the tropical birds he loved to keep.

It normally took a lot to turn Ulrich’s stomach, but this onslaught of death in a place where he had hoped to renew his own life was just too much. (154)

The traditional horror vampire, caring nothing for its mortal snacks, is unaffected by the prospect of disease. Not so the new, sensitive vampire of the post-1970s. Ulrich stumbles out of the bar,

terrified, and immediately seeks out the man he's been hoping to have an affair with, only to discover that his would-be lover is also infected.

Of course, the easiest way for any author to deal with the issue of infected blood is to simply make his or her vampire immune to disease. Anne Rice was not thinking of HIV in 1976, but disease in general is quickly dealt with, as the vampire Lestat waltzes fearlessly with the body of a dead plague victim: "He stumbled over the child as he pulled the mother along in widening circles, singing as he danced, her matted hair falling in her face, as her head snapped back and a black fluid poured out of her mouth" (75). Louis and Lestat, even in the 1980s and later installments of the "Vampire Chronicles" series, are unafraid of the plague or any other disease they may contract from the blood they drink – being already dead, they are safe from such mortal concerns. This is doubtless part of what has made them so appealing to a gay readership: not only are they androgynous, handsome, and sensual, they also have the potential to live forever. Rice's easy solution has been used by other authors as well; in the works of popular authors Barbara Hambly, Laurell K Hamilton, and P N Elrod, disease is not and has never been a concern of the vampire – or rather, the only disease the protagonists must contend with is the factor of vampirism itself. These are the vampires who most support Brite's descriptions of the joys in not-so-safe-sex, and who most test Auerbach's claim of a revolution in the vampire psyche; her "plague-stricken" culture is far from all-inclusive.

For queer vampires like Califa's Ulrich, however, Auerbach's statement tends to hold true: the HIV theme is not so easily dismissible. Blood and AIDS are too closely interwoven. Contemporary authors who skim over the HIV subject have typically written works with heterosexual or asexual protagonists. Even Rice, although she has extensive popularity with gay readers, was not specifically pursuing queer concerns, but rather an androgynous ideal (Ramsland 148). In contrast, queer vampire literature from the past two decades reveals a richly diverse series of AIDS-related themes, from glorious immortality to quick and brutal death, with a full spectrum of explorations and stereotype subversions in between. Images of plague and despair are often alternated with messages of comfort. Reading through, one can find support, grief, horror, or hope, as well as pointed political statements and subtle reversals of the gay-sex-death stereotype that helped renew the genre in the first place.

AIDS is not all-encompassing in the queer vampire world, but it is certainly pervasive. Even in stories where the vampires themselves are immune to HIV, often their friends and companions are not. In Califa's work, Ulrich's lover Alain meets his fate with pride and determination, though the vampire himself "had no more tears. He thought he would never cry again" (169). Renee M Charles has her vampire possess a sixth sense for healthy blood in her short story "Cinnamon Roses." As her heroine explains, "How else do you think vampires avoid HIV and AIDS? Once you've had a whiff of that moldy-grapes and stale-bread odor ... you can smell a victim coming at you from two blocks away" (23). However, this does not protect the vampire's mortal paramour, the woman Rose. At the end of the story, the vampire gives Rose a bouquet of condoms for her mortal boyfriend to use: "Maybe her boyfriend did find my gesture touching ... but from my point of view – not knowing how faithful he might be – I was only protecting my investment against blood that stank of moldy grapes and bread long gone stale" (42). The politics are undeniable in their subversion of the gay-sex-death paradigm; this text subtly changes the association of AIDS with sexual intercourse away from the queer vampire's activities and directs it toward the heterosexual encounters between Rose and her boyfriend – a small but important point in terms of breaking down the association of queer sex with death.

The vampire protagonist in Ulysses G Dietz's *Desmond* is likewise immune to HIV and other blood-borne diseases. However, he is an active member of the gay community, and his friends and associates do not enjoy the same immortality. Unlike the vague concerns of the vampire in "Cinnamon Roses," this text's vampire is concerned with HIV on a deeply personal level. Desmond visits AIDS patients in the hospital, doing what he can to offer comfort and companionship to the dying (96). These patients do not serve as any source of nourishment – Desmond's motives are altruistic, not survivalist. While Lestat laughs at mortal existence and keeps to an insular vampiric community, Desmond respects and loves those non-vampires he interacts with. His involvement with the gay community is only emphasized by the sorrow he feels at the deaths of his AIDS-infected friends.

Moreover, in *Desmond*, the emphasis is not on the seduction of immortality, but rather on the beauty that is transient mortal life. Desmond's lover Tony has the option of choosing vampirism, or living out the rest of his natural life. Even when he is in an ambulance after a stabbing, and knows he is about to die, he refuses Desmond's offer: "You already did save me, sweetheart. Now all you can do is transform me. And I've decided I can't do that" (313). Although Tony ponders immortality, he decides against it; his own death comes at knifepoint. A more directly AIDS-related death occurs when Ulrich offers vampiric unlife to his lover Alain in Califa's "Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow"; Alain chooses death, though at Ulrich's hands rather than letting the disease waste him away. One of the most extreme examples of this anti-immortality theme is found in C Dean Andersson's aptly-named "My Greatest Fear," a very short story with two unnamed protagonists, in which one member of an HIV-infected gay couple becomes a vampire and unsuccessfully attempts to convince the other to join him. "This thing you've become," says the mortal half of the couple, "it's *worse* than Death" (15). Not only does the mortal resist his vampiric lover's offer, at the end of the story he sneaks back in daylight to end his partner's undead existence.

If there are times where the mortals refuse the option of salvation, there are also times when the vampire does not make the offer at all. In "Cinnamon Roses," anyone HIV-infected would be anathema for that vampire to even consider feeding from. In "Tongues," a story by D Travers Scott that is written as an email from a gay man turned ghoul to his former and HIV-infected lover, vampires pick and choose the ones they save:

Look, I'm not trying to gloat here.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry I can't come to you. I can't save you; I'm not a Father and only they can save people. Companeros' blood would just lengthen your suffering. I did ask him, believe me. He said no. I'm sorry. They're actually very selective, very particular about these things. You'd be surprised. (66)

Generally speaking, vampiric literature offers no more "cure" against AIDS than one might find in modern reality; any easy solution to HIV in fiction would belittle the real world problem and undermine the intensity of the subject. Despite the imaginary setting, the message remains brutal and clear: There are no easy outs. AIDS kills.

The danger of HIV is made even more frighteningly immediate when the vampire is not immune and experiences the illness firsthand. Ouida Crozier's *Shadows After Dark* is a science fiction tale of vampires who come from another dimension, and quickly discover that they are

falling prey to some mysterious human disease. A vampire scientist named Kyril is dispatched to Earth to try and discover a cure for the disease; she falls in love with a female AIDS researcher. Through the entire novel, although the protagonists are not themselves affected by HIV, other characters are – including a heterosexual pregnant woman. Kyril, evaluating the status of AIDS research in America, is placed in an outsider position from which she makes very clearly charged judgements:

“I have used our contacts inside the medical establishment both here and in Europe to attempt to assess the risk from AIDS to our species.” She paused, drawing a deep breath. Her eyes met those of her audience squarely. “I have concluded that the situation is far worse than it could possibly have appeared at first sight. In this country, there has been an active *cover-up* of data and other information relative to this disease complex.” Her voice became heated with anger. “There is so much abhorrence in American culture of homosexuality that no one of power outside the Centers for Disease Control has wanted to deal with the reality of AIDS, or the potential consequences to the American public if the disease is allowed to run its course unchecked.” (50)

Likewise, Douglas Crimp has written, “Every public agency whose job it is to combat the epidemic has been slow to act, failed entirely, or been deliberately counterproductive” (16). The voice of the vampire is the voice of the queer community.

These undead deal with AIDS on a personal level, but are not “representative” of the disease in the more classical sense and allegory that Twitchell describes and Hanson objects to. Although the link between vampires and HIV issues has been much more direct than the link between vampires and other diseases such as syphilis or tuberculosis, the traditional metaphor is still a frequent and useful literary tool for some authors. In their introduction to the anthology *Night Bites*, Brownworth and Redding have this to say about vampirism:

Anyone can become a vampire simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, befriending the wrong person, choosing the wrong lover, offering hospitality on a cold night to the wrong houseguest (or being offered hospitality by the wrong host). Because anyone can become a vampire, the threat is that much more terrifying. *No one is safe.* (ix)

It is not difficult to substitute “HIV-infected” for “vampire”. Vampires can be used as a striking representation of HIV itself – much as they were blamed for tuberculosis, they may also be blamed for AIDS.

When looking at this particular vampire-as-HIV view, *Shadows After Dark* is a possible starting point – as is any other story wherein the vampire kills its prey – but it lacks the extended metaphor behind Jeffrey McMahan’s *Vampires Anonymous*, in which vampires try to join a 12-step group because they want to “stop the killing.” The protagonist, the vampire Andrew, is unenthused: “The whole concept does seem ludicrous ... When people of our status relinquish those aspects of themselves that set them apart from the dour population, they do not impress me as protectors of our race” (36). Ultimately, the bloodsucking members of *Vampires Anonymous* find themselves unable to fight their true natures. The parallel between the idea that a vampire

cannot escape its nature, and the idea that a gay man cannot change his preferences, is unmistakable and has been noted by Trevor Holmes: “In connecting vampires to addiction and displaying the ‘cure’ in the regular confessional meetings of Vampires Anonymous, McMahan is confronting the still-present discourse of ‘curing’ homosexuality among ‘family values’ adherents (who number doctors and psychiatrists among their ranks)” (179). Unlike *Shadows After Dark*, HIV is never directly mentioned in McMahan’s text – we are left to make the connection for ourselves. Much as gay men are stereotyped as spreading death through sexual intercourse, these vampires spread death through feeding; the vampire is representative of both the queer and the disease, but he is also completely unable to alter his basic nature. Andrew lives as he was created to live, and he makes no apologies for his preferences.

At the other end of the reactionary spectrum is the vampire who is neither immune to HIV nor serves as a metaphor for it, but rather is directly susceptible to the virus. In Nikki Baker’s short story “Backlash,” the vampire is an asexual creature being hunted by a lesbian police officer. The vampire’s victims are identified by the fact that they have been drained of blood and were in the last stages of AIDS-related terminal illnesses when they died – despite having been healthy only hours before. The vampire, Marilyn, has contracted HIV, and must feed more and more often in order to keep herself alive. As Marilyn says, “AIDS accelerates death in everything” (254). In this story, the vampire is clearly the enemy – the police officer is forced to destroy her, thus ending the spread of the danger. Marilyn and her lethal feedings can easily be compared to any AIDS-infected and sexually promiscuous individual – she spreads the disease, while at the same time it is slowly killing her. In a twist on the usual queer vampire dynamic, and in a distancing of the association between the queer and the disease, there is nothing pleasurable or sexually-oriented about Marilyn’s feedings. Rather, she is a spreading contagion that is stopped by the efforts of a lesbian heroine; the queer protagonist is not responsible for the disease, and is in fact the source of salvation from it.

Alternative to these sweeping themes, some works make only passing reference to HIV, while nevertheless acknowledging it as an important issue for the gay and lesbian community. In Robson’s “Women’s Music,” a story which seems to be set in the early 1980s, the protagonist is a lesbian singer. Her stage manager says to her, “I hope you don’t get that damn flu. I worry about you. All your high-risk behaviors, don’t think I don’t know about them. I hear things. I’m your manager; I have to know what the hell you’re doing. You know, you should really get tested” (191). Likewise, in Mercedes Lackey’s *Children of the Night* the HIV theme is present but subdued. The two protagonists (the psychic Diana Tregarde and her vampire lover Andre) are heterosexual, but their friends are not. Diana’s friend and ally Lenny is a gay man who serves a sidekick-type role in the story, along with his partner Keith. In the next book of the series, *Burning Water*, we discover that the likeable Lenny and Keith have been infected by HIV, and passed away.

Death is prevalent in stories about AIDS and the undead – after all, dark vampire tales are not meant to have happy endings. While the queer vampire has a more intricate relationship with disease than the traditional horror vampire, this relationship is not a positive one even when modified by queer discourse. It is hard to imagine any situation in which an association with HIV could be considered uplifting, but a survey of the queer vampire in recent literature reveals that it need not, at least, be wholly negative. The reactions are too varied to be thoroughly detailed or classified herein; the prevalence of HIV issues in the queer mindset is undeniable, as are the ways in which the horror genre has become a forum for the exploration and discussion of these issues.

The vampire has been made into hero, guardian, and mourner – a vocal political activist within an area of literature that nevertheless promises safety through its relative obscurity. Vampires who are concerned with HIV watch their lovers die. Vampires themselves die. Like any similar mortal in a modern relationship, the gay and lesbian vampire deals with disease – and it is not easy. AIDS issues are hardly the only example of the ways in which the queer vampire illustrates its own societal context, but they are an excellent illustration of the value inherent in further study of the area. The queer vampire's importance lies in its subversion of popular paradigms; when these characters deal with AIDS, blood does not necessarily equal terror. Vampires are not necessarily evil. HIV-positive does not necessarily translate to gay. And most importantly, the fiction available offers not a hastily homophobic comparison of gay sex with death, but instead a detailed look at the impact the spread of HIV has had on the queer community.

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