

Moral Relativism and the Vampire Mythology

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Vampire. When I was a child, the word sent chills down my spine. Of course, in those days, most of my ideas about vampires were based upon film versions of *Dracula* and Stephen King's '*Salem's Lot*. Not only were the vampires of my childhood evil, seductive monsters, but they had an amazing ability to return to life after being killed off in the previous film(s).

Why are vampires so popular?

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung both examined that question.

According to Freud, fascination with vampires arises from an interest in morbidity, combined with repressed sexuality and aggression. Vampires represent repressed Oedipal desires, the savagery of the undead reflecting the child's interpretation of parental intercourse – what Freud called "the primal scene".

Jung saw the vampire as an expression of the "shadow" – portions of the self unable to be recognized by the conscious ego because in order to do so, the ego had to admit their existence. Although the "shadow" includes positive traits, it also includes repressed desires, anti-social tendencies, and similar dark elements which the ego was too ashamed of to consciously admit.

Even before Bram Stoker began writing *Dracula*, the Western vampire novel had existed for over a century. Stoker, who lived in the repressive Victorian era, imbued his creation with veiled sexual energy. His *Dracula* was a creature who wasn't merely antisocial – *Dracula* played with society, forever above the trivial concerns of daily life while enjoying social pleasures to the fullest.

That is largely what vampires were – the ultimate, seductive, unkillable monster – when Anne Rice published *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976. There had been other vampire protagonists before *Interview*. In 1975, Fred Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape* explored *Dracula* from the vampire's point of view. Grandpa in *The Munsters* was hard to dislike.

Still, it was largely Anne Rice's vision that transformed the vampire from mere monster to someone we might like to be.

Freud's and Jung's analysis of the fascination with vampire stories contain more than a grain of truth. Both agreed that vampires satisfy a paradoxical longing for death and immortality. However, both lived in a time when the vampire was seen as purely evil. Their vampires were not things one consciously longed to be. As society has changed, and culture has changed, so has the meaning of the vampire legend changed – and with it the reasons for our fascination.

Human beings are not social animals in the same way that ants, elephants, or wolves are. It is not in our nature to act in the best interests of society as a whole. Our deepest motives are self-absorbed, self-interested, and self-serving. Luckily, we are intelligent enough to know that the interests of society also serve the general interests of the individual. (Some, such as Karl Marx, have disagreed vehemently with this social philosophy.) We have developed methods to control our antisocial impulses – guilt, shame, fear of punishment, etc.

There is a tide in societies. The tide begins with the formation of social order when the need to band together – to hunt, grow food, or provide protection – is overwhelming. These are often survival situations, when antisocial behavior is an evil that cannot be tolerated. The Old Testament exhortations against any self interest are typical of these times.

The tide ends when a society collapses, either from without or from within. Some pressure prevents the current social model from meeting the needs of the individuals from whom the society is composed, and the society is replaced by something new, disbanded, or forcibly destroyed from without. In these times, rational self-interest becomes a paramount virtue, a trait required for survival, as numerous post-apocalyptic novels and movies attest.

In between these extremes, society meets individual needs to varying degrees. When society meets the needs of most individuals, the image of the vampire attracts because of its exploration of unacknowledgeable desires. When society fails to adequately meet individual needs, renegade images – such as those of modern vampires – are compelling because they represent a real need to forge an identity apart from the ones approved of by the social fabric.

Vampires, although dead, live on a scale that we do not. They have turned their face from the sun – society, rationality, morality, order – and have gained self mastery as a result. The modern vampire is a creature of moral relativism. It is wrong to kill, but the vampire kills to survive (as do we all), and in the modern mythology the vampire hero either does not kill (as in *Forever Knight*) or kills only those whose morality is itself questionable (Anne Rice's *Lestat*). This vampire has not only achieved immortality, but he has enhanced senses that make his experience of "eternal life" richer than that of mortal men. Whatever anguish the vampire feels as a result of his undead state, we know in our secret hearts that *we* would not feel it. *We* would feel only the joy and the freedom.

A significant subculture exists wherein the participants take the role of vampires. In some cases, this is live role-playing, using rules and backgrounds provided by game systems such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Participants wear dark clothing and makeup, trying to look the part. In some cases, alterations are permanent – dental work creates "fangs", or tattooing creates "scars" from the vampire's bite. In effect, these visual rebellions from the norm are no different than the current proliferation of rings in ears, noses, and eyebrows, or wearing unusual hair colors and/or styles.

We are fascinated with the new incarnation of vampires because they represent a personal validation of our morally relative choices while providing a recrimination of the social outlook that generates guilt about those choices. Other factors come into play – protection from punishment, sexual power, and fulfilling predatory longings – but it is the condemnation of our current social order, coupled with a need to create a new kind of individual, which makes *these* vampires fascinating *now*.

With the image of the vampire, we have begun to reexamine the philosophies by which we live.
