



Dark Romanticism Within and Without John Polidori's "The Vampyre: A Tale"

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Abstract: The article explores the origin and evolution of Dark Romanticism as a disruption within the onset of the Romantic Era as a revolutionary movement. It attempts to trace the various discourses impacting the discussion around Dark Romanticism within the nineteenth century milieu and document its distinctions and parallels with other contemporary movements that ultimately led to its concretization as a genre. It acknowledges its contributions in assimilating the complexity of nature by encouraging writers to interrogate the previously veiled, deeper, and darker meanings of humanness. While Dark Romanticism expanded on the 'inhumane' of humanness, this article intends to analyze such characteristics in the short-prose work, "The Vampyre: A Tale" by John Polidori, which emerged as a confluence of Dark Romantic sentiments in 1819. The trope of the vampire created by Polidori is peculiar both, in being emblematic of real negative sensibilities and magnifying it to an extent that seems supernatural. It thus, becomes a work of interest in dissecting the idea of Dark Romanticism.

Keywords – Dark Romanticism, John Polidori, The Vampire, Gothicism, Transcendental Movement, Virtue, Horror, Darkness

1. INTRODUCTION

The Romantic Era originated as an artistic, musical, literary, and intellectual movement in the end of the eighteenth-century Europe. It featured characteristics that included 'sensibility,' love of nature, sympathetic interest in the past, mysticism, romantic criticism, and primitivism. It evolved partly as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment, and the scientific rationalization of nature. The movement emphasized intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing pre-eminence on emotions such as horror and terror, apprehension, and awe – especially those experienced in confronting the new aesthetic categories of 'sublimity' and beauty of nature.

From the very inception of Romanticism as the celebration of euphoria and 'sublimity,' it had been equally fascinated with melancholia, insanity, crime, the grotesque, and the irrational. This form gradually developed into "Dark Romanticism" as a literary sub-genre of Romanticism. The term "Dark Romanticism" was coined by a literary theorist, Mario Praz in his study of the genre in "The Romantic Agony," published in 1930.

2. EXPLORING DARK ROMANTICISM

2.1 In relation to Gothicism

According to critic G.R. Thompson, "the Dark Romantics adapted images of anthropomorphized evil in the form of Satan, devils, ghosts, werewolves, vampires and ghouls," (Thompson, 12) as emblematic of human nature. British authors such as Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Shelly and John Polidori, who are frequently linked to Gothic fiction, are also sometimes referred to as Dark Romantics. As opposed to the concepts of Romanticism such as nature, pastoral life, and medievalism; Dark Romanticism explores themes

such as supernaturalism, sin and evil, and self-destruction. Also, the focus of Romanticism from the individual rather than the society shifts to the focus on the outcasts of the society and their personal torment in Dark Romanticism. Having thus mentioned, Dark Romanticism is often conflated with Gothicism. While some critics declare the two to be one and the same, others pronounce it as: “All Gothic novels are Dark Romances but, not all Dark romances are Gothic in nature.” Thus, the issue stands debated.

2.2 *In Relation to Transcendentalism*

Dark Romanticism is known to have gained its importance in the mid nineteenth century when it erupted as a movement against Transcendentalism in America. A core belief of Transcendentalism was in the inherent goodness of people and nature. Adherents believed that society and its institutions have corrupted the purity of the individual, and they expressed faith in people being at their best when truly “self-reliant” and independent. This goodness however, evoked resistance to writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who saw the dark and evil side to the spiritual truth. They fought against the puritans as Dark Romantics, infamous for their works of “madness, revenge, and tragic fate,” and progressed as precursors to the age Dark Romanticism in America. They explored the genre as opposed to the Transcendentalist objectives: while it directed the masses to follow their conscience, the Dark romantics questioned, what happens if we follow our darkest impulses; while they motivated the people to rely on themselves, the Dark romantics chanted “You are fallible.” They believed that the “universe is strange and unknowable” and it is important to explore the “weird, odd and unsettling sensations.” Edgar Allan Poe thus, questions:

“Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence – whether all much that is glorious – whether all that is profound – does not spring from the disease of thought – from the moods of mind exalted at the expense if the general intellect.” (Rigby, 23).

3. ‘VAMPIRE’ AS THE PIONEER OF DARK ROMANTICISM

It is interesting to note here, that though Dark Romanticism found its legacy in the mid nineteenth century, the beginning of its foundation could be traced back to the late eighteenth century Europe, where folklore of the human-monster, the vampire, was already existent. Entering from the daily walks of story-telling and myth-making, the idea of “the vampire,” symbolizing the darker side of human nature, became an intriguing concept of the Romantic Era. Initially carrying sexual overtones from the days of yore, known for the “seductive kiss of the vampire,” it later came to symbolize a curse upon human nature as a result of its evil dwelling. The very first of its glimpses can be found in the poem “The Giaour” written by Lord Byron in 1813:

“But first on earth, as Vampyre sent,
Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent;
Then ghastly haunt the native place,
And suck the blood of all they race;
There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
At midnight drain the stream of life;
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
Must feed they livid living corse,
Thy victims, ere they yet expire,
Shall know the demon for their sire;
As cursing thee, thou cursing them,
They flowers are withered on the stem.
But one that for thy crime must fall,
The youngest, best beloved of all,
Shall bless thee with a father’s name—
That word shall wrap thy heart in flame!
Yet thou must end thy task and mark
Her cheek’s last tinge—her eye’s last spark
And the last glassy glance must view

Which freezes o'er its lifeless blue;
 Then with unhallowed hand shall tear
 The tresses of her yellow hair,
 Of which, in life a lock when worn—
 But now is borne away by thee
 Memorial of thine agony!
 Yet with thine own best blood shall drip;
 They gnashing tooth, and haggard lip;
 Then stalking to thy sullen grave,
 Go—and with Gouls and Afrits rave,
 Till these in horror shink away
 From spectre more accursed than they.” (Byron, 37-39)

An extract from “The letter from Geneva, 1819” tells us that in a congregation seated by Lord Byron, his physician Dr. John Polidori, Percy B. Shelly, Mary W. Godwin, and her sister, they decided to write a “tale depending upon some supernatural agency.” It was then that Mary Shelly composed her piece for *The Modern Prometheus*, Lord Byron composed “The Fragment of a novel” and John Polidori, inspired by Byron’s “The Giaour” composed “The Vampyre: A Tale.” The horror short story, “The Vampyre” got published erroneously in the name of Lord Byron in 1819, but it was only later attributed to Polidori.

“The Vampyre” (1819) proved to be a phenomenal text in the early decades of nineteenth century, not only as it brought forth a whole new genre of Dark Romanticism, but also as a precursor to Vampire Literature that we know of today. The classic novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker also happens to have been inspired from it. Henceforth, I intend to discuss the characteristics of Dark Romanticism by analyzing Polidori’s “The Vampyre.”

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF DARK ROMANTICISM IN POLIDORI’S “THE VAMPYRE”

Virtue is defined in the dictionary as the conformity of one's life and conduct to moral and ethical principles; uprightness; rectitude. Victorian Age (approximately 1820-1914) having descended from the Romantic Era (approximately 1798-1837), also entailed the remnants of some of the ideas that were prominent of the Romantic Era. The term “virtue,” and the idea of a person being virtuous, has persisted 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” to be a well-rounded, appropriate human being in every way possible. Since we know that Polidori’s “The Vampyre: A Tale” is a text inspired by that of Lord Byron, there must exist a theme of vice and virtue.

Therefore, several mentions of both vice and virtue are found in “The Vampyre: A Tale,” pertaining mostly to women. As a matter of fact, it runs in conjunction to the theme that women of the time should be pure, proper, and pristine. The importance of women being virtuous and pure is focused around those ladies whom Lord Ruthven pursues. Initially, we perceive that he pursues them as companions, aiming towards sexual gratification. It is not until later in the story that we can infer that he is actually attracted to the pure woman because of his thirst for blood. The purity of the heart and the soul is seen as the ideal choice for the vampire of this period 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 Ruthven, or the “Vampyre” himself. Thus, virtue as opposed to the Transcendental and Romantic Movement becomes a curse that interprets morality as leading to evil. In the Introduction to “The Vampyre,” Polidori explains that if the victim of the vampire’s bite survives death, he/she shall himself become one of them. This leads us to an analogy that morality disguised as evil, in the end, professes its virtue in the form of grave terror. This point can be substantiated by the critic, Northrop Frye, who pointed to the dangers of the demonic myth-making of the dark side of romanticism as seeming “to provide all the disadvantages of superstition with none of the advantages of religion.”

Polidori’s stark and horrid description of Audrey’s condition after he realizes that Lord Ruthven is a vampire provides us with the most prominent characteristic of Dark Romanticism. It indeed explores the darkest human impulses, madness, hallucinations, and negative sensibilities.

“Aubrey became almost distracted. If before his mind had been absorbed by one subject, how much more completely was it engrossed, now that the certainty of the monster's living again pressed upon his thoughts... He only uttered a few words, and those terrified her. The more he thought, the more he was bewildered.... For days he remained in this state; shut up in his room, he saw no one, and eat only when his sister came, who, with eyes streaming with tears, besought him, for her sake, to support nature. At last, no longer capable of bearing stillness and solitude, he left his house, roamed from street to street, anxious to fly that image which haunted him. His dress became neglected, and he wandered, as often exposed to the noon-day sun as to the midnight damps. He was no longer to be recognized; at first he returned with the evening to the house; but at last, he laid him down to rest wherever fatigue overtook him. His sister, anxious for his safety, employed people to follow him; but they were soon distanced by him who fled from a pursuer swifter than any--from thought.” (Polidori, 26)

In the above extract taken from “The Vampyre,” Aubrey begins to lose his sanity, disturbed by the grievous horrifying image of the darker side of existence. After acknowledging and sensing the power of the vampire, Polidori explains through Aubrey, how the pleasures of life and the “beauty” of it is a mere facade, that reality holds the most vicious kinds of beings as well. Polidori remarkably balances the sense of “carpe diem” that Romanticism had brought in in the late eighteenth century England with the sense of quite losing it on the other hand. The loss of sanity, morality, Life, beauty, and perfection brought forth “sin” and “destruction,” the larger characteristics of Dark Romanticism, visible by sense of insanity, immorality, Death and immortality, ugliness, and imperfection. Edgar Allan Poe concretizes this concept as path towards another mode of existence that traditional romantics ignored:

“I have no faith in human perfectibility. I think that human exertion will have no appreciable effect on humanity. Man is now only more active – not more happy – not more wise, than he was sic thousand years ago.” (Rigby, 20)

Terror thus, works not only as a theme in the story but gets personified by Polidori to an extent that establishes its actions as another collective against humanity. With the two forces acting against each other, the victory of terror over humanity is sought towards the end of the story when, instead of the vampire's blood vessels, Aubrey's blood vessels in the neck burst open and he dies a pitiful death while the vampire continues his legacy. Ironically, critics also draw parallels with the characters of Audrey and the vampire, bringing us to the conclusion that Audrey and the vampire could be interpreted as the two sides of the same human being, who is shocked and delirious when he explored his darker impulses. This can be substantiated by the clear sense of ambiguity that the texts contains when even though through the title it is declared that one of the characters of the story is a vampire, none of them is identified as one until the very end.

5. CONCLUSION

Under the above analysis, it can be concluded that the trope of the vampire not only symbolizes destruction, betrayal and “sin,” but also power, strength and cunningness as the part and parcel of the ultimate human potential. It embraces crude reality, humanness, and the value of nature itself. Thus, encapsulating the very essence of the sub-genre of Romanticism, “The Vampyre” by John Polidori can be seen to explore a unique characteristic of it – the Dark Romanticism.

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