

Weird Fangs: The Vampire Story in Weird Tales from 1920-1939

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It is correct, I think, to assert that of the dozens of pulp magazines of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, *Weird Tales* was preeminent in its influence on the fields of horror, fantasy, and to a slightly lesser extent, science-fiction. Within its pages the careers of numerous enduring writers were fostered and developed. Authors such as H.P. Lovecraft, Robert Bloch, Robert E Howard, and Ray Bradbury published successfully in *Weird Tales*. Throughout its run, the magazine stayed true to its title, and the stories found in *Weird Tales* are filled with graveyards, zombies, werewolves, eldritch horrors from beyond the bounds of time and space, and, of course, vampires.

I consider myself pretty conversant with vampire literature in English, from its beginnings with Polidori's *The Vampyre* in 1819 up until the present, and one of the things that continually strikes me in today's world is that the vampire is very much part of the cultural landscape. Vampires turn up everywhere in popular culture; they are virtually ubiquitous. Starting in about 2007/8, there was a huge vampire craze that was possibly brought on by (as much as people love to criticize it) *Twilight*. Those books and the subsequent movies of them, and other popular series such as *True Blood* and many, many other books, films, and television series represented a widespread interest in vampire narratives. The interesting thing is, more recently, people have thought, "Well, the vampire craze is dying down. Vampires are old hat, everybody is switching their attention to zombies, or fairy tales, or angels." The problem with that impression is that vampires seem to be thriving, on television and elsewhere. In September, SyFy channel launched a new series, *Van Helsing*, which features a post-apocalyptic landscape dominated by vampires, where humans are fighting to survive. Season three of *The Strain* began in August, and season three of *From Dusk Til Dawn* started in September. Recently, plans have been announced to make television series based on the vampire films *Let the Right One In*, *The Lost Boys*, and *What We Do in the Shadows*. In terms of print, a quick search of Amazon.com will inundate you vampire stories old and new. Every time you turn around, new vampire narratives are cropping up, so what we have is something that is very familiar to people these days. And

one of the interesting things about this is that despite the tremendous variations in the depiction of the undead, there is a stereotype of the vampire that is broadly applied by readers and viewers, and which is often hotly debated. (Mention “sparkly” vampires online, and see what happens.)

What we have started learning, going back to the vampire stories from *Weird Tales*, is that while there were a limited number of vampire novels after Stoker and before, say, *Interview With the Vampire* in the 1970s, none of which achieved the popularity of either of those works, there was an extensive vampire literature that was being produced—it just wasn’t necessarily in novel form. Consider that in the time period under discussion today, 1923-1940, only about forty novels (based on a survey of a bibliography in Gordon Melton’s *The Vampire Book: An Encyclopedia of the Undead*) were published in the US and the UK, all of which can rightly be described as obscure. On the other hand, there were plenty of vampires in *Weird Tales* and plenty of quasi-vampires (psychic vampires, science fictional vampires, vampiric places and things). What we’re seeing is that where the general impression is that all of the traditional pop culture vampire lore comes straight out of Stoker’s novel, and film adaptations of *Dracula*, that’s not necessarily the case. You can look at some of the pulp fiction, particularly the stories in *Weird Tales*, and start to get a sense of where various elements that were picked up by later writers were first planted in the public consciousness. There is a slow build up in the many different varieties of vampire stories in *Weird Tales* that form a solid contribution to the collective knowledge of vampire lore.

In order to assess the impact and shape of the vampire story in *Weird Tales*, the first task was to identify which stories used vampire tropes. This was not as simple as it might sound, as the vampire is a deceptive monster, taking many forms. We initially used Greg Cox’s bibliography, *The Transylvanian Library*, to generate a list of potential stories, and in addition consulted Stephen T. Miller and William G. Contento’s *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Weird Fiction Magazine Index (1890-2007)* to search for additional stories, using terms in the titles that might indicate the presence of a vampire, such as, well, vampire, blood, undead, lamia, and a few others. In addition, the anthology *Weird Vampire Tales* (edited by Martin H. Greenberg, Robert Weinberg, and Stefan R. Dziemianowicz) included several stories from *Weird Tales* that were not otherwise noted in the bibliographies. All citations were verified through the *Internet Speculative Fiction Database* (ISFDB.org). We also consulted Margaret Carter’s bibliography

The Vampire in Literature, which listed an additional 36 stories published within the date limits. Dziemianowicz, in the Introduction to *Weird Vampire Tales* states that there were about 90 vampire stories during the original 1923-1954 run of *Weird Tales* (12). In addition, the count of vampire stories may vary due to definitions of the term “vampire.” For example, Carter includes in her bibliography stories such as “The Loved Dead,” which is a rightly infamous story of necrophilia, but which has little, if anything, to do with vampirism. We started with a list of 77 stories generated from these bibliographies, and reviewed them to see how (or if) they addressed the topic of vampirism and fell within the purview of our study.

The Cushing Library at Texas A&M University boasts an almost complete collection of *Weird Tales*, but due to the fragile condition of the magazines, we attempted to find reprints of as many of the stories on our list as possible, an endeavor much aided by the listings in ISFDB. When the story had not been reprinted (12 of the total), we did go to the original source for review of the material. As a side note, I have previously argued that part of the continuing influence of *Weird Tales* is illustrated by the number of stories from the magazine that have been reprinted over the years (Benefiel, “Shadow of a Dark Muse,” *Extrapolation* 49.3, Winter 2008). The high proportion of these stories that have been reprinted at least once, and in some cases many times, is a testament to that influence.

After reading all the stories, we felt that 26 of the total were not, in fact, vampire stories, even taking a fairly broad view of what constitutes vampirism. For example, Seabury Quinn’s story, “Uncanonized,” is about a tragic maiden who chooses death before dishonor, and ends up as a werewolf for her troubles. At one point it is directly stated “Gertruda was no vampire” (Quinn, 107). There are no other characters in the story that would meet any definition of vampire; Gertruda the non-vampire is the sole supernatural being. Yet this story is listed in Carter’s bibliography as a vampire story. Also listed in these bibliographies are multiple Cthulhu mythos stories by H. P. Lovecraft and others, which might be classics of the horror genre, but are in no way representative of vampire lore. Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror,” creepy as it undoubtedly is, does not contain a vampire. And while there might be—just barely—an argument to be made that the narrator of “The Outsider” is in some ways undead, he more closely resembles a reanimated mummy than a vampire; there is no indication that he feeds on blood, or other life force. Clark Ashton Smith, who did write some traditional vampire stories,

also wrote a number of dark fantasies that do not quite fit. For example, “The Testament of Athammaus” concerns a headsman whose axe just cannot seem to kill an outlaw votary of the Old One Tsathoggua. While the outlaw returns in increasing monstrous incarnations, he is more interested in tearing apart random citizens, not drinking blood. (I hesitate to call this cannibalistic, since there is very little of the human in this being.)

And there are, in addition, five stories that are barely possible to stretch into the vampire genre. An early story, from 1925, by Frank Belknap Long, “The Ocean Leech,” involves a ship attacked repeatedly by the “amorphous tentacles” of a monstrous cephalopod. It envelops its prey with a translucent slime, and uses suckers to draw the life (and the blood) from the hapless crewmen it takes. Eventually—and just in time to save the narrator of the story—fire vanquishes the monster. Is this a vampire? It certainly does not resemble the urbane Count Dracula in any way! It may be entirely natural, as well, which puts it outside the vampire realm, yet I cannot entirely dismiss it from the genre.

So, how do we define a vampire? Throughout this group of stories, most of the solidly vampiric stories fall within a standard definition. As Hugh B. Cave put it, in his story from 1932, “The Brotherhood of Blood,”

A vampire...is a creature of living death, dependent upon human blood for its existence. From sunset to sunrise, during the hours of darkness, it is free to pursue its horrible blood-quest. During the day it must remain within the confines of its grave—dead, and yet alive. (322)

He goes on to say that the vampire must appear either as a bat or a human, and that after killing its victims by biting their throats and drawing their blood, the victims will rise as vampires as well. This is very standard stuff, although the vampires (and near-vampires) of *Weird Tales* do expand on tradition in a variety of ways. And this is important.

The standard, or traditional, vampire takes a place beside the non-traditional vampire in *Weird Tales*, and for that a broader definition is in order. We considered vampires, for the purpose of this survey, to include beings who depend on taking blood or “life force” for survival. They may be humanoid, or not. They may be “undead” or not, depending. Some vampires in this group of stories are extraterrestrials, most are supernatural, although not all.

Time does not permit a discussion of each of the vampire stories in *Weird Tales*, so I will try to hit some highlights of the variety of both “traditional” and “non-traditional” vampires in this body of work.

In looking at the more traditional depictions of the vampire in *Weird Tales*, it is obvious that Stoker’s seminal vampire novel, *Dracula*, played a large role in depictions of the undead throughout the 1920s and 30s. While *Dracula* was hardly new by that time, having been originally published in 1897, the story had been successfully adapted for stage and screen, perhaps most notably with the 1927 run of Balderston and Deane’s stage adaptation on Broadway, which brought stardom to the previously unknown Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi in the title role, leading to the classic 1931 film. If one can gauge interest in the vampire narrative from the number of stories the editors saw fit to publish over the years prior to, and surrounding, the Broadway play and the film of that play, it does seem that interest rose during that time. Of the fifty-five vampire stories surveyed from *Weird Tales*, six were published between 1923 and 1927; 14 between 1927 and 31, and another 17 from 1932-35. It seems likely that some writers were deliberately seeking to evoke memories of *Dracula*—in August Derleth’s epistolary story, “Bat’s Belfry,” the hero is attacked by a group of pallid and voluptuous vampire women, the followers of the master vampire Baronet Lohrville..

Other allusions to *Dracula* abound: in the case of the more traditional vampires, many seem to be cut from the same cloth as the movie and stage incarnations of *Dracula*. Foreign noblemen, who cast no reflection and drink no wine (Seabury Quinn’s “The Man Who Cast No Shadow,” Arlton Eadie’s “The Vampire Airplane”), unnatural creatures who must be invited into a residence (Greye LaSpina’s “Fettered,” Seabury Quinn’s “Restless Souls”) and who cannot cross running water (Everil Worrell’s “The Canal”).

Others, while adhering to common vampire lore, are readily distinguishable from their Transylvanian predecessor. Some vampires are victims of familial curses, such as the three generations of vampires in Victor Roman’s “The Four Wooden Stakes,” the father and son in Earl Peirce Jr.’s “Doom of the House of Duryea,” and the tragic young woman at the center of Hugh B. Cave’s “The Brotherhood of Blood.” This last seems to hammer home particularly the folkloric idea that vampires will attack their family and friends, before branching out to other

victims, which forms an important plot point in Edmond Hamilton's "The Vampire Master." The coffins, crypts, and graveyard settings are plentiful.

In addition, there are vampires here who seemingly construct their own reality, tricking victims with illusions of luxurious mansions and estates (Clark Ashton Smith's "Rendevous in Averoigne," and "The End of the Story," Frank Owen's "The Tinkle of the Camel's Bell," Carl Jacobi's "Revelations in Black")

Another interesting theme in many of these stories is the presence of female vampires. In one of my favorite stories, Bassett Morgan's "The Wolf-Woman," the female vampire (who has no name and does not speak) is discovered frozen in a glacier, resuscitated, and climaxes the story by attacking the members of an Arctic expedition, accompanied by her seven similarly thawed albino wolf-dogs, and riding (naked) on a revived woolly mammoth, her ankle-length blonde hair flowing behind her. While Seabury Quinn's "The Silver Countess" and John Flanders' "The Graveyard Duchess" fit into the "mysterious aristocrat" mold, quite honestly, gender-swapping either of these stories would not make a bit of difference to the plot or the denouement.

Both Lya (Eleanor Smith's "Satan's Circus") and Nita (W. K. Mashburn's "Placide's Wife") cannot claim noble blood, they are of exotic backgrounds. Dolores (Seabury Quinn's "Daughter of the Moonlight"), although not, technically speaking, a vampire, shares a mysterious background—a witchy mother of uncertain origin, and she does come back to a brief life after death by being exposed to the light of a full moon, which has been a staple in vampire literature dating back to the 1847 penny dreadful, *Varney the Vampire*. Once so revived, would she have been a vampire? She's dispatched with a well-placed bullet before we can find out, but in any case, she was up to no good.

I should also mention that there are stories where vampirism is suspected, but not proven, particularly Ralph Milne Farley's "Another Dracula?" and J. Wesley Rosenquist's "Return to Death." Both of these stories involve unfortunate episodes of catalepsy, the latter ending very badly as the narrator's friends stake him, believing him a vampire.

There are, as well, a number of stories where vampirism is only tenuously related the story, perhaps a print version of "clickbait," For example, in A. W. Bernal's "Vampires of the Moon," the "vampires" in question are subterranean Moon-people who control the minds of visiting

Earthlings, and sap their will. In Lloyd Eshbach's "Isle of the Undead," the story is so packed with evil minions, zombie Persians, volcanos, bondage, and other delights that making the main baddies of the story vampires is almost gilding the lily.

And what of the non-traditional vampires? I'd like to discuss just a few examples. In Clark Ashton Smith's "Genius Loci," the malignant influence of the spirit of an abandoned meadow (complete with a sinister pond) is enough to enslave the mind of a landscape painter, and eventually drive him to drown himself and his fiancé. Robert Bloch's "The Shambler from the Stars," while fitting well into the Cthulhu Mythos, includes a horrific alien entity who drains the blood from the mystic who summoned him. Wandrei's "The Fire Vampires" also features an alien being who incinerates humans with precisely directed lightning; the designation of vampire applies primarily because there is an indication that the destruction of the victims provides the alien with the nourishment of their life-force, and also transfers to it all their knowledge.

Perhaps the most famous of the *Weird Tales* non-traditional vampires, however, is C. L. Moore's "Shambleau." Moore's creature, an alien who takes on the appearance of an exotic young woman, has Medusa-esque tentacles which envelop her prey, and feeds on their life-force in such an erotic fashion that her victim craves more of her attention. At the end of the story, space adventurer Northwest Smith has been rescued in the nick of time from Shambleau, and his rescuer makes him promise if he runs into another of her kind, he'll kill it at once. His response, in a wavering voice, is "I'll—try." (WVT 168).

In sum, the vampires (and near vampires) of *Weird Tales* cover an astonishing amount of ground. While there are those who owe a great debt to Stoker's *Dracula*, (and Polidori's Lord Ruthven, and Rymer and Prest's Varney, and LeFanu's Carmilla, to name a few), they not only draw from those vampires, but emphasize and amend particular parts of vampire lore, with the effect of creating a richly faceted body of vampire myth which is still widely utilized today. The acceptance, as well, of such varied creations as these vampires may have served to help expand the vampire narrative beyond the confines of the nineteenth century vampire, and paved the way for the startling array of vampiric manifestations we have seen in subsequent decades.

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