“YOUR FALL FROM GRACE HAS BEEN THE FALL OF A CENTURY”: THE VAMPIRE AS REPRESENTATION OF CONTEMPORARY CONSCIOUSNESS IN ANNE RICE’S NOVELS

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“Your Fall from Grace has Been the Fall of a Century”: The Vampire as Representation of Contemporary Consciousness in Anne Rice’s Novels

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Abstract

Anne Rice is widely considered to be a leading figure of contemporary gothic fiction, being predominantly well known for her vampire-themed novels. A successor to earlier more traditional portrayals of vampirism, she examines through her unconventional vampires her contemporary social issues and anxieties. Vampires, being traditionally reflections of the social outsider, are given by Rice a narrative voice in a genre twist that casts the dominant social ideology itself and not the victims of its ostracization of the devil of the tale. In *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), Rice examines feminist issues and the toxicity of patriarchal ideals as well as the anxiety born out of the loss of faith in societal norms and beliefs through her themes of good and evil, the supernatural, and the macabre, in her effort to reflect contemporary mindsets and concerns. In *The Vampire Lestat* (1985), Rice continues her motif of subverting the traditional connection between vampirism and Otherness by applying a positive twist to the convention of the vampire as a symbolic sexual outsider. Drawing on the AIDS epidemic in 1980’s America and the fights for liberation of the queer community that followed, Rice gives a voice in carefully constructed narratives that subtly celebrate Otherness in addition to vilifying repressive and oppressive dominant cultural ideologies.

*keywords:* vampire, gothic, otherness, contemporary American literature
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INTRODUCTION

Anne Rice was born as Howard Francis Allen O’Brien in 1941 in New Orleans Louisiana to Irish Catholic parents. She is considered today one of the most prominent and influential authors of contemporary American gothic fiction and is known for her ornate prose, as well as for the classic Gothic elements she employs in her writings. Rice’s writing is characterized by the frequent use of the macabre, the uncanny and the supernatural, her interest in the themes of physical and internal decay as well as in ambivalent gender roles and corrupted or unstable characters who blur the lines between victim and villain. The narration in her novels is highly sentimental and her protagonists are often overwhelmed by bouts of emotion. It is worth noting that in spite of the preternatural and extravagant nature of her work Rice herself considers her writing to be autobiographical and realistic, since she considers the experiences of her early life as exerting a heavy influence on her themes and style of writing. The purpose of my research has been to support the hypothesis that Rice’s writing functions as a successor to the gothic subgenre of vampire fiction, through the reimagining and contemporization of its traditional conventions. This will be demonstrated through the examination of various themes and motifs found in Rice’s first two vampire novels, *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and *The Vampire Lestat* (1985).

Rice’s early relationship with her parents has had a great impact on her work; the positive influence of her father has functioned as an artistically encouraging force, while her mother’s tumultuous life has inspired her to escape the restrictions that have proven to be her mother’s downfall. Both her parents have been educated, while Rice’s father has played a major role in cultivating her talent and appreciation of literature and the art of writing. According to Bette Roberts’ biography, “He not
only read to the children but wrote stories and poems for them, walked with them all over New Orleans, exposed them to classical music, and introduced them to the public library. Throughout her adult life, until her father’s death in 1991, Rice enjoyed her father’s pride in her accomplishments” (5). It was her mother’s inadvertent influence, however, that was the biggest catalyst in Rice’s later literary themes. Having suffered from alcoholism for years, she passed away in a young age during Rice’s adolescence. This event is believed by biographers to have partially been the root of Rice’s macabre tone and themes of decay, as she has attempted to work through her grief and her relationship with death (Roberts 6). What is perhaps more significant, however, is that Rice, admittedly, grew to view her mother as a passive victim to the circumstances, someone who failed influence her own life (6). In her desire to escape the same fate of repression and victimhood, Rice embraces the subversion of traditional gender roles both in her life and her work, roles that are strongly, and yet subtly, criticized in her fiction.

Another major factor that has influenced Rice’s writing is perhaps her tumultuous relationship with religion throughout her life. Her strictly Catholic family background as well as her own fascination with Christian lore is prominently evident in her work. Her Gothic novels are replete with heavy Catholic imagery and deeply religious characters that suffer from bouts of religious and ethical conflict and guilt. The ever-present questioning of Christian values and the problematizing of what it means to be moral come as no surprise, as Rice’s relationship with her religious background and disposition has always been uncertain; she is known for her regular alternating between Catholic devotion and bitter rejection of the Catholic church’s stance on social issues. Some of the main themes that permeate the plot of her works are questions of ethics, the meaning of good and evil in a secular world, as well as the
questioning of the concept of free will and the degree that nature and one’s societal background dictate their actions and choices. As Roberts argues, “Obstacles to the characters’ journeys toward self-realization are more internal than external, [...] and are rooted in misconceptions and delusions, which are similar to Rice’s relationship with Catholicism” (Roberts 10).

This is fuelled by her upbringing in New Orleans, the quintessential Southern Gothic city setting that Rice chooses for many of her tales. New Orleans is often considered to be the primary ‘haunted’ city of the New World. The Cajun population residing around the city in combination with the European style of its center that makes it reminiscent of the Old World create a unique and unsettling combination. This has granted New Orleans its Gothic atmosphere since the earlier days of Colonialism. Nowadays, the lingering memory of the old horrors of slavery that haunts the American South is prominently felt in New Orleans. In Robert Mighall’s words in his essay “Gothic Cities,” “New Orleans’ allegiance make it a temporal and cultural anomaly, a breach in the fabric of time and space. Ghost and other Old World demons naturally slip through, finding a conductive port for entering the New World” (59). Memories of violence and inequality shape the American South into the perfect Gothic setting for social issues and corruption to be uncovered and criticized, employing the New Orleans’ supernatural rumors as metaphorical means. This union of past and present, the supernatural and the realistically cruel, makes the city the ideal home for vampires, being Rice’s most favorite characters. What is important is that in works, as is the case of the Vampire Chronicles (1976-1998), these timeless creatures are not only vampiric, but also wealthy plantation owners whose corrupt human activities reveal the inherently evil side of their vampirism.
The two novels, *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*, which are the first novels in Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles* series, have been the subject of various academic studies, particularly after their popularization by the 1994 film adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire*. In particular, Nina Auerbach, in her landmark book *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995), in which she explores the history of fictional representations of vampires as reflections of the Anglo-American consciousness, dedicates a brief section to *Interview with the Vampire*. Discussing the novel from various perspectives, she arrives to the conclusion that the amorality of the characters and their failure to achieve closure or a positive outcome combined with Rice’s indulgent and ornamental writing style constitute a reflection of the disaffected and disillusioned youth of the 1970’s. The book *The Gothic World of Anne Rice* (1994), edited by Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne, is a collection of essays on various novels by Rice covering varying areas of research. Kathryn McGinley, in her essay “Development of the Byronic Vampire: Byron, Stoker, Rice,” examines Rice’s vampire novels as a continuation of the traditional vampire fiction when it comes to literary portrayals of vampire figures as reflections of human experiences of their respective eras, while Aileen Chris Shaffer’s “Let Us Prey: Religious Codes and Rituals in *The Vampire Lestat,*” focuses on the ways in which traditional definitions of good and evil often found in gothic literature are deconstructed by Rice in order to demonstrate that the gothic novel evolves along with the culture that produces it.

When it comes to the examination of specific themes arising from Rice’s reimagining of the notion of vampirism, scholars have predominantly focused on representations of femininity and womanhood, the vampire as a metaphor for homoeroticism and queer sexualities, religious themes as well as the way that the
inner world of the vampire serves as a representation of contemporary consciousness and anxieties.

Concerning the issue of gender, there is an agreement among scholars that Rice employs the grotesque and exaggerated imagery in order to satirize and critique traditional gender roles. In “Blood Relations: The Gothic Perversion of the Nuclear Family in Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire,” Candace R. Benefiel examines the distorted image of a nuclear family presented in Rice’s novels in order to demonstrate how Rice challenges and satirizes traditional gender roles. She argues that the incestuous blurring of the nature of the relationships between family members as well as of the gender lines between a maternal figure and a homosexual male appear as a scathing parody of normality. In “‘Mute and beautiful’: The Representation of the Female in Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire,” Lorna Jowett elaborates on Benefiel’s arguments by specifically examining the character of Claudia. Jowett argues that Claudia in Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire represents the oppressed female in a patriarchal society. According to Jowett, she remains childlike and mute throughout the novel, the object of the male-led narrative, and is punished by death when she goes against her role as a domesticated female while turning against her father figure.

Concerning the issue of the vampire as a representation of queer sexuality, there are noticeable differences in the way scholars examine the subject and the way that Rice’s approach is perceived, which ranges from it being a scathing commentary on homophobic society to a laudable presentation of queer experience. In “Anne Rice and the Queering of Culture,” George E. Haggerty focuses on the repressed homoeroticism Lestat represents seen within the context of contemporary American society. According to Haggerty, Rice’s writing is highly critical of the societal anxiety
against homosexuality. He argues that Lestat’s depiction as both attractive and repulsive, both kind and fearful, induces a direct commentary on the way patriarchal society is simultaneously homoerotically obsessed with the image of the attractive male and homophobiaically repulsed by it. In “Cruising the Alternatives: Homoeroticism and the Contemporary Vampire,” Andrew Schopp once again discusses the parallel between vampirism and non-traditional sexualities. He perceives it, however, not as a social commentary on the part of the author, but as a honest metaphorical representation of queer experience and argues that this explains why this form of literature is attractive to marginalized communities. The two views can be reconciled through Max Chia-Hung Lin and Paul Juinn Bing Tan’s “Vampirism: A Visceral, Secular Religion of Paradoxical Aesthetics,” where the simultaneous attractiveness and repulsiveness of undead characters in Gothic literature is discussed in order to point at the ways in which Gothic imagery allows the audience to explore concealed impulses and emotions in themselves.

Finally, there is a general agreement among the examined sources that the figure of the vampire in Rice’s novels functions as a representation of various aspects of contemporary anxieties and the collective consciousness. In “Postexistentialism in the Neo-Gothic Mode: Anne Rice's ‘Interview with the Vampire,’” Barbara Waxman Frey discusses the vampire complex morality as a representation of the shift in human consciousness and ethics of good and evil as well as free will that have arisen with the prevalence of secularism in the contemporary Western world. In “Children of Satan/Children of God: Religious Identity and the Vampire in Gothic Literature,” Cheryl Holland also discusses the figure of the vampire as a representation of human thought. She, however, approaches the issue from the opposite perspective, viewing the vampire as a symbol of religious identity, imagery, and faith, paying particular
attention to the way in which earlier depictions of the undead in the nineteenth
century have been symbolic representations of the religious Other, ranging from the
vilified Catholic Church in the case of Victorian England to theories about the
Dracula being an anti-Semitic figure.

My research aims to focus on the aforementioned themes appearing in Rice’s
novels *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat* in an attempt to examine
the vampire not simply as a successor to early literary vampire manifestations but as a
revitalized figure that can metaphorically help readers come to terms with
contemporary social issues and anxieties.

The vampire is a creature of universal folklore, an eternal figure that
constantly reappears and revitalizes itself in literatures through various cultures and
centuries. As a result, the cultural significance, characteristics and symbolisms that
literary vampire figures carry vary from culture to culture which reveals the different
mindsets and views that exist as regards monstrosity. The vampire of European
folklore came to represent, as most images of horror, the darker aspects of its context
culture, as well as the contemporary anxieties of its time and place, ranging from
infectious disease which spreads through families to what one would consider sexual
defiance and perversion. Vampires have always served as fertile ground for these
symbolic reflections, not only due to their resemblance to humans, but in large part
due to their original folkloric status as resurrected human corpses. The image of a
decaying organism and the revulsion it generates closely associates with the notion of
domestic abjection, the symbolic casting away of the darker, more uncomfortable
aspects of the self and the community, and thus the idea of such a resurrection is
connected with the return of repressed emotions and desires.
A significant turning point in the dominating image of the vampire occurs with the popularization of the British Gothic genre. Most significantly, John William Polidori’s 1819 short story *The Vampyre* is often considered to be the source of the changed image of the vampire figure that still persists in contemporary literature. A far more humanized, aristocratic, and most significantly attractive figure than the one common in folklore, Polidori’s vampire, Lord Ruthven, serves as the inspiration for a number of similarly imagined literary figures, a trend that culminates in Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, with its emblematic vampire figure. The humanization of the vampire figure has enabled the symbolic identification of what is inhuman and monstrous with the rejected social outsider. As Margaret L. Carter argues in her essay “The Vampire as Alien in Contemporary Fiction,” “[s]uperstition can function as a device for social control” (27), a statement which supports the notion of marginalized individuals being associated with inhuman entities of folklore that are supposed to evoke fear and disgust. The new vampire may have been more visually attractive but continues being portrayed as vile and frightening. Max Chia-Hung Lin and Paul Juinn Bing Tan’s essay “Vampirism, a Secular, Visceral Religion of Paradoxical Aesthetics” focuses on the fact that “in early Gothic texts, vampires are depicted as primitive, beastly, and savage rather than as superior to or even comparable to humans, as creatures whose ancient shadowy residences and reclusive comportments distance themselves from humanity’s sphere” (121). Even the aristocratic Count Dracula is described as animalistic due to the heavily graphic and repulsive imagery that is used in his literary representations. This insistence on the vampires’ presentation as hideous, sexually promiscuous, and appalled by all the religious imagery revered in Victorian England has established the notion of the vampire as a feared and reviled social outsider. However, this has reinforced the connection of
vampirism with repressed human desire. As Alan Ryan argues, “Perhaps [the vampire] works so powerfully on our imaginations because he represents such a distortion of human nature, a reversal of everything normal. And perhaps-just perhaps-we are fascinated by him because, in our heart of hearts, we want to be just like him” (xvi).

The developing blurring of the lines between the feared and the desired, the human and the monstrous, the outsider and the repressed self is the instigating force behind the conceptualization of the vampire figure that Rice has introduced which has contributed another shift to the image of the vampire. In Rice’s case, the vampire is no longer a marginal but a central figure with its own narrative voice. The shift has occurred as a natural result of the gradual sexual and social liberation evidenced in contemporary societies. Fred Botting also talks about the “change in cultural attitudes towards the outsider” (18). The socially rejected and deviant vampire has now become a vessel through which the audience is able to deal with their own psychological repressions and external social oppression. As Stephanie R. Branson argues regarding the placement of the vampire in a narrator’s and protagonist’s position, “[t]his shift in perspective signals the modern association with the underdog or outsider” (35). The shift mentioned here has significantly contributed to the revitalization and repopularization of the vampire figure bringing it much closer to contemporary perceptions and concerns. As Martin J. Wood argues in his essay “New Life for an Old Tradition: Anne Rice and Vampire Literature,” “the literary and cultural codes by which [the vampire myth] has been inscribed and transmitted-before Anne Rice-have become obsolete” (59). The new image of the vampire is one that does not promote oppression but freedom of expression and self-acceptance which have certainly led to the humanization of the vampire, hence the internalization of its
evil features. Certainly this has facilitated the identification of the readers with the vampire outsider now seen as an extension of their own repressed desires and social divergence. In the case of Rice’s novels, her vampires could be viewed in tandem with the fights of the gay community in the U.S. in the 1980s for securing its rights. Furthermore, the American public’s increasing distrust of authority in the 1960’s and 1970’s that occurred as a result of events such as America’s involvement in the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, the AIDS crisis, and various marginalized groups’ struggle for liberation has contributed to the audience’s need to identify with the defiant outsider and enjoy narratives in which dominant ideologies are metaphorically demonized and condemned. Rice’s rebellious vampire protagonists have become the prototype image that has influenced the way the vampire is perceived today ¹ as well as the medium through which various socio-cultural anxieties can be examined.

The first chapter of this study examines the novel *Interview with the Vampire*. The vampiric family unit that the novel focuses on is examined as a reflection of the inherently toxic and oppressive notion of the patriarchal nuclear family that characterizes the conservative America of the 1970’s, allegorically placed in an eighteenth century plantation setting where a wealthy family lives hiding a dark secret; however, as it will be examined, traditional Gothic views on monstrosity are questioned as the true secret of the family unit is not the threat that they pose to their surroundings but the internal abuse that they suffer from each other’s hands. Particular attention will be paid to the character of Claudia, the female vampire trapped in the body of a small child. What will be discussed is the manner in which

¹ Prominent examples of contemporary manifestations of the image of the vampire in which Rice’s influence can be clearly perceived include *The Historian* (2005) by Elizabeth Kostova and *Fevre Dream* (1985) by George R. R. Martin.
her predicament is reflective of the infantilized woman who is imprisoned in the
domestic sphere, in addition to the way in which her narrative deconstructs traditional
views of Gothic femininity. Another lens through which the novel will be examined is
the loss of Catholic faith that is suffered by Louis, the narrator, after his vampiric
transformation. Attention will also be paid to the way in which Rice employs Catholic
imagery, preternatural elements and images of decay, all constituting traditional
elements of Southern gothic writing in order to examine through them certain
contemporary concerns with regard to female characters.

The second and final chapter focuses on the novel The Vampire Lestat. The
main theme to be examined deals with the portrayal of social outsiders and the threat
they exert on the status quo of the other characters. Lestat, the novel’s narrator,
modelled on the 1980s queer community and its fights for liberation, is seen as a
decentralized and catalytic voice in the way the narrative develops. As for the
character of Gabrielle, attention is paid to her vampiric transformation that liberates
her from her oppressive gender role as well as to her eventual disillusionment with all
social norms. Rice, in these two cases, chooses to create two subversive characters
who do not hesitate to support their Otherness and demand its acceptance and social
inclusion.

What this project attempts to combine is various themes and elements, as these
result from Rice’s Interview with the Vampire and The Vampire Lestat. The
examination of Rice’s writing will hopefully lead to a better understanding of those
conventions that are revitalized in her effort to interpret and respond to contemporary
issues and anxieties.
CHAPTER ONE

FEMINIST AND RELIGIOUS REFLECTIONS IN ANNE RICE’S
INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

1. Anne Rice’s Subversive American Vampire

Published in 1976 as Anne Rice’s debut novel, Interview with the Vampire is widely considered to be a significant work that allows Rice to explore through the figure of the vampire her own personal anxieties and contemporary social concerns.

Rice’s life and studies in San Francisco in the 1960’s have broadened her literary horizons that had been previously restricted by her religious upbringing and her marriage to the poet Stan Rice, while they provided an encouraging environment for her creativity as an author. It was, however, the death of the couple’s young daughter of leukemia in 1972 that became the catalyst for the conception of Interview with the Vampire. Rice projects her grief, despair, and turning away from religion after this traumatic event on one of the characters in the novel, the melancholic Louis. The writing of the novel had been for Rice a cathartic experience. Her daughter’s blood disease turns in Rice’s imagination into the tainted blood of her vampire characters. The will to preserve her deceased daughter in her memory has also given birth to the character of Claudia, the woman-child who never grows or dies in the novel.\(^2\)

The novel is narrated through the point of view of Louis, a young plantation owner in late eighteenth century New Orleans. After an episode of despair, brought on by the death of his brother, Louis turns into a vampire by the vampire Lestat, a young man who he ends up forming a homoerotic relationship with. Louis

\(^2\) As Bette Davis quotes Rice in her 1994 book Anne Rice.
comes to regret his decision and suffers from bouts of guilt over his condition and existential questionings that take him away from his Catholic beliefs. The pair turns into a vampire and adopts a young girl named Claudia, who eventually turns into a bitter and cynical woman trapped in the body of a young child, who is forever dependent on her male guardians.

The monstrous vampiric figure, originally conceptualized in the British Gothic tradition, is initially altered in order to adjust to the American Gothic mode. Rice’s vampires in Interview with the Vampire inhabit and stalk the streets of New Orleans, the quintessential American and Southern gothic city, whose history of slavery and racial violence has turned it into a fertile ground for fictitious supernatural horror. They are not aristocrats but plantation owners, with the vampiric family reflecting the wealthy human families in the American South. They are Catholic, or formerly Catholic and when they talk they resort to heavy religious imagery and language. They appear more humane in their appearance and manners than more traditional depictions of vampires and their sexuality is more alluring than repulsive. However, their monstrosity is repositioned here, becoming of an inner rather than an external trait also relating to their social status. So their otherness does not derive from their non-human nature but from the fact that they belong to a different caste. As a result, the association of the vampiric figure with social otherness leads to a different perception of the vampiric monster. In Veronica Hollinger’s words, “the shift to a postmodern perspective, helps to explain one important feature of the treatment afforded many kinds of monsters in today’s fiction, the fact that so many are […] delineated from the inside rather than the outside” (200). The vampire is a monstrous figure that easily lends itself to reconceptualizations of selfhood due to the division they experience as regards their inner and outer self as a result of their semi-
human nature. Furthermore, there is often no clear distinction between these different divisions of self, as the threads of the narrative are blurred and intertwined. As a result, the definitions of good and evil no longer hold. As Hollinger argues, “One of Anne Rice’s most tellingly postmodern ploys is to characterize her vampires as themselves obsessed with questions about good and evil” (203), which shifts the attention from the society to the characters’ own interpretations. The vampires’ potential evil does not necessarily stem from their inhuman and murderous nature, but by the pressure imposed on them by external reality as regards the role they are expected to play in social reality, which now discredits evil as an inherent vampiric trait.

Early reviews of the novel had been widely mixed, with many praising Rice’s contemporary twist and rebirth of the classic Gothic figure of the vampire, and others criticizing her dense writing style. In a particularly scathing review published in The New York Times, Leo Braudy disagrees with the view that Rice is a “dazzling storyteller” and criticizes her for “ballooning, pompous language” (1). Even her enthusiastically positive reviewers, who have praised her philosophical questionings and reinvention of a Romantic myth, avoid delving into the novel’s take on contemporary issues. It is worth noting, however, that since the early days after its publication, the novel’s audience had mainly been women and homosexual men due to the social-cultural oppression they had experienced.

It was after the publishing of her next two novels, The Vampire Lestat (1985) and Queen of the Damned (1988) as well as the popular film adaptation of Interview with the Vampire in 1994 that the synonymous novel attracted the attention of the scholarly community. Rice has now started being examined as a feminist and queer author, while the themes of toxic patriarchy, the unhealthy nuclear family, the
monstrous feminine, and the new age secular existentialism are recognized as the main elements of *Interview with the Vampire*. As any author, Rice has been studied by a number of researchers and academics who are opposed to her approach to the social issues she touches upon. Her feminism has been viewed by some as misinformed due to her predominantly male cast of characters. James Keller, in his book *Anne Rice and Sexual Politics* (2000), criticizes *Interview with the Vampire* as being unintentionally homophobic, as it employs a same-gender couple to symbolically represent the unhealthy heterosexual nuclear family, demonizing, thus, one of the social groups that Rice sets out to represent. In his own words,

[Rice’s] portrayal of a same-sex relationship perpetuates one of the most destructive heterosexist myths: the assumption that gay and lesbian domestic units mirror heterosexual unions. […] [The portrayal] imposes upon same-sex relationships the worst malfunctions about heterosexual marriage […] Thus the depiction is in keeping with the current political trend of blaming the decline of the American family upon the single group that is arguably least responsible: those who do not participate in it at all. (16-17)

Despite the occasional criticism by feminist or queer theorist sources however it is undeniable that the way in which Rice employs deconstructed conventions of literary vampirism in order to reflect her contemporary prominent issues has been highly influential and worthy of examination.

The theme of the existential anxiety brought on by the loss of belief in any institutions of authority, as well as the inherent toxicity of the nuclear family, an idealized staple of the novel’s contemporary conservative America, and the oppression suffered within it by its female members are major components of the narrative which will be examined in the subsequent subsections.
1.1 The Vampiric Family as a Symbolic Representation of the Oppressive Patriarchal Family Unit and the Infantilized Feminine

In *Interview with the Vampire*, Rice employs American Gothic motifs, in order to criticize, through her writing, the cultural notion of the nuclear family, as well as women’s position and oppression in it. Influenced by the second wave of feminism and its arguments against oppression and inequality in the household, Rice creates a dark subversion of the traditional nuclear family through the main vampiric family unit that features in the novel. The union appears superficially ideal, since the preternatural danger that it poses to the surrounding society, as well as the abusive and unhealthy relationships between its members, expose the nuclear family as another problematic institution within a broader context.

In particular, the New Orleans eighteenth century plantation setting, the theme of family secrets and guilt, and the supernatural element, are the elements that Rice employs for the sake of her argument. Furthermore, the roles that the characters assume constantly alternate and become blurred: Louis takes on both the role of the battered and trapped wife as well as the one of the male oppressor, while Claudia is presented as both a Gothic heroine, with her childlike stature representing the infantilized and dependent woman in the household, and as the Gothic monster or the threatening Other that poses a danger to the surrounding society. This interlayering of meanings highlight the multiplicity and multifacetedness of Rice’s vampire characters.

The central vampiric family unit that is the focus of *Interview with the Vampire* serves as a dark subversion of the traditional nuclear family, a portrayal meant to expose the institution’s intrinsic flaws through exaggeration and Gothic imagery. In James R. Keller’s words in his *Anne Rice and Sexual Politics*, “Rice has
gone out of her way to make her vampire clan into a representation of the quintessential dysfunctional family, replete with domestic abuse and justifiable homicide. All the conventions of the normative family unit have been inverted” (15). The novel’s family unit consists of the male vampires Louis and Lestat, as well as the child vampire Claudia. The New Orleans plantation setting of their abode, the dark secret of the seemingly distinguished family, and the supernatural element are prominent elements that are used to expose the corruption of the social constructs portrayed in the novel. Elements such as the plantation setting and casual mentions of slavery are merely employed as vessels to recall traditional Southern Gothic aesthetics utilized here in a superficial and stereotypical manner. The actual issue at hand for Rice is the exposure of the flaws of the nuclear family, an issue made contemporary in the 1970’s with the rise of the second wave of feminism. The vampires present themselves as a mockery of normality, with the male ‘parents’ even adopting traditional heterosexual gender roles of dominance and submission. They live as a wealthy and aristocratic family of the New World, surrounding themselves with fine possessions and acting as patrons of the arts. Louis describes his first years as a vampire living with Lestat and his elderly mortal father, as follows:

Lestat and I sat down to dinner each night with the old man and made noises with our knives and forks, while he told us to eat everything on our plates and not to drink our wine too fast. With dozens of miserable headaches I would receive my sister in a darkened bedroom, the covers up to my chin, bid her and her husband bear with the dim light on account of the pain in my eyes. (Rice 47)

The habits and symbols of normality turns, thus, into parodies of themselves, as they are merely a hollow façade concealing the cruelty and corruption of the vampiric
family unit. The seemingly refined family is presented here as an inhuman and foreign entity living at the expense of the rest of the population, serving as the monstrous Other of Gothic fiction representing the most feared impulses of humanity. Even the beautiful child Claudia is a ruthless predator, taking advantage of her traditionally attractive and innocent appearance in order to feed on and harm the human community. In Candace R. Benefiel’s words,

[they are, as Lestat says, “One happy family.”] The many scenes that follow of Claudia’s life in her new family, and her early transgressions against the family rules, are played as a parody of normality. Seamstresses are brought in to make beautiful clothes for her, tutors are hired to teach her, and like the greedy and unrestrained child she is, she kills them. (269)

Even Claudia’s childlike characteristics are twisted into monstrousness. The monster here is not an obvious Other, but the beautiful protagonist. As a result, monstrosity here becomes an internal trait that is not easily discernible anymore. So the characters’ external appearance is often deceiving, serving as a ploy to manipulate others.

Despite their vampiric and threatening nature, it is mainly the inherently toxic dynamics that develop between the family members which are responsible for the abusive and unhealthy relationship that develops between them as well as for the domestic oppression that they experience. Specifically, the concepts of good and evil become relative, as the true dark secret of the family is not their murderous nature but the toxic relationships they form with one another. Lestat assumes the role of the physical manifestation of the violent and oppressive patriarch, acting both as the father/maker and the dominant male lover of both other members of his household. As Constantine Chatzipapatheodoridis argues in his MA thesis, “Rice decides to
destabilize standards of gender roles and sexuality to the extreme – gothic – degree, by presenting a menage with almost every possible sexual combination, except for the normative” (80). The incestuous and blurred relationships between the family unit – “Father and daughter. Lover and Lover.” (Rice 94) – function as an exaggerated representation of the toxicity of the patriarchal and conservative nuclear family of the horrors that take place behind closed doors as opposed to a civil public image. Rice here attacks the ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family, a concept sanctified by the contemporary conservative American society, as opposed to the oppression and abuse that unavoidably takes place within it behind closed doors.

The inhuman nature of the characters allows for the blurring of gender roles that forms the basis of Benefiel’s argument that says that “the vampire should be viewed as a pangendered construct in which traditional male and female genders are combined to form a new whole” (268). Here, Louis assumes, thus, the role of a battered wife, forced to remain in an abusive marriage, as he is stripped off the power to survive on his own. In his own words, “I had to stay with him […]. [H]e had me at a great disadvantage. He hinted there was much I didn’t know and must know and that he alone could tell me” (Rice 35). Lestat, the acting patriarch and head of the household, is violent and controlling in his effort to keep his family members close to him through a combination of force and manipulation. As Louis describes his behavior, “[t]here was always the promise behind his mocking smile that he knew great things or terrible things, had commerce with levels of darkness I could not possibly guess at” (Rice 37). By intentionally depriving Louis of the means and information necessary to survive as a vampire, Lestat forces him to remain in the relationship by rendering him helpless and unable to live on his own. Louis is tricked into co-creating the child vampire Claudia, whose shared parentage is used by Lestat
as a leverage to dissuade Louis from abandoning him. Louis is manipulated into believing that it is his responsibility to look after her. According to Keller,

Louis believes that his partner only desires his wealth and his Pointe du Lac plantation. Indeed, their lives together do initially resemble the arranged, aristocratic marriages [...] The young, disconnected, neglected wife remains at home while the dissolute husband goes out marauding every night, squandering the collective fortune. (15)

Louis takes on the role of the submissive wife, imprisoned in the domestic sphere as a sole caretaker of the child, while Lestat roams the city, carelessly spending the family wealth. The family dynamics revealed here remind of an oppressive and arranged marriage plus forced motherhood, in which learned weakness and maternal responsibility are employed to keep the woman in an unwanted relationship within a patriarchal construction.

The most significant figure of the novel, however, when it comes to commentary on gender dynamics in the household is Claudia, the child vampire that only grows in mind but not in body, who serves as an apt allegory for the infantilized and depended woman. She is undervalued and dismissed by her environment as childlike as well as entirely dependent on her male guardians in order to be able to participate in society and adulthood. According to Linda Badley, Rice herself has described Claudia as “the embodiment of a failure to deal with the feminine, a woman trapped in a child’s body. [...] She’s the person robbed of power” (130). Claudia is the perfect symbolic representation of a wife and daughter in a conservative and patriarchal household presented as disempowered and financially reliant on her husband or spouse. In Lorna Jowett’s words, in her essay “’Mute and beautiful’: The Representation of the Female in Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire,” “Rice
presents Claudia as an exaggerated symbol of the female, but at the same time she also re-inscribes the male narrative and heterosexual roles for women. It is here that Claudia's importance for feminist readers lies” (59). Claudia is an exaggerated representation of the trapped, child-like, oppressed woman in the household being however strong-willed and mentally independent. At the same time, however, she serves as the monstrous figure of Gothic traditions, aggressive, sexual, inhuman while posing a threat to the peaceful way of life outside her household. The roles in this Gothic setting are subverted and blurred, as she is both the heroine and monster at once.

In this part of the novel, both the male members of the household are agents of patriarchal authority, perpetuating Claudia’s infantilization and lack of agency. As it will become evident, Rice’s use of the Gothic goes beyond the examination of the fears and hidden desires of the dominant society and often demonized Otherness in her attempt to expose contemporary reality and its institutions as the predominant sources of evil. Even Louis himself loses here his monstrous Otherness becoming instead an oppressive patriarchal spouse. In this twist of Gothicism, the narrative’s symbolic threads become intertwined and both character roles and conventions are blurred. Louis admits to treating Claudia as a yielding child: “how many times I must have forgotten, spoken to her as if she were a child, fondled her too freely, brought her into my arms with an adult’s abandon” (Rice 221). Both Louis and Lestat dress, groom, and view Claudia as a beautiful possession, even when she is well into her adulthood. Claudia has been created explicitly with the aim to be a companion to Louis, her existential purpose being to function as a tool, a third party in a male relationship; the use of a third person is enhanced by Rice through the deprivation of Claudia of a narrative voice, since her life is inferred through Louis’
narration with her own voice being completely silenced. Due to her predicament, marginalized position in the household, and forced dependency on Louis, Claudia’s inhuman nature becomes far more visible since it constitutes a reaction against the stifling of her voice and the oppression she experiences. As Janice Doane and Devon Hodges argue, in their “Undoing Feminism: From the Preoedipal to Postfeminism in Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles,*”

[n]o longer is it the woman who must be protected from the monster; she is the monster. In place of the monstrous sexual appetites of Stoker's somewhat marginalized vampire women is the rage of a monstrous girl vampire against her infantilization and de-pendancy in a world defined by the fathers. (424)

It is her unwillingness to yield to patriarchal oppression as well as to conform to the stereotype of the stoically long-suffering and “mute and beautiful” woman, as Louis describes her, and not her vampiric self that turns her into a monstrous feminine.

Claudia fights against her patriarchal bonds, a fight that culminates in her killing of Lestat, the symbol of patriarchal oppression, as she refuses to allow herself to believe in the inevitability of the narratives of patriarchal rule. As she grows older, in mind if not in body, Claudia becomes dissatisfied and angry, unable to withstand her own lack of autonomy. “I will not live with this hatred any longer, I will not live with this rage! I cannot. I will not abide it!” (Rice 237), she says to Louis, as she begs him to grant her immortality, helping her to free herself from the patriarchal bonds of her dependency on men. She rages against her childlike body that forces her to live in such a state: “Let tears gather in your eyes. You haven’t tears enough for what you’ve done to me. Six more mortal years, seven, eight… I might have had that shape! […] Yes, that shape, I might have known what it was to walk at your side. Monsters! To give me immortality in this hopeless guise, this helpless form!” (Rice 237). Her anger
and dysphoria eventually culminate in her decision to take it upon herself to murder Lestat in order to free herself and Louis, whom she initially views as an ally, from Lestat’s oppression. Louis’ attempt to dissuade her from the act of killing Lestat is rooted in his belief in Lestat’s invincibility, a statement that echoes the perception of patriarchal dominance as an inescapable and eternal aspect of society: “He is stronger than you know! Stronger than you dream! How do you mean to kill him? [...] He’s immortal. No illness can touch him. Age has no power over him. You threaten a life which might endure to the end of the world!” (Rice 113-14). And yet Claudia is not discouraged, claiming the patriarchal power for herself: “Do you think I’ll possess his power and my own power when I take him?” (Rice 114). Through Louis and Claudia’s words about Lestat, Rice indirectly comments on the apparent inescapability of patriarchal oppression. Claudia fights against her monstrous representation of her oppressor by refusing to accept the idea of set social structures and narratives as being inevitable and intrinsic in one’s existence.

Claudia manages to severely injure and free herself and Louis from Lestat, and yet her victory is superficial and short-lived, as she is punished for her transgression against the patriarchy, paying for it with her life. As Louis becomes infatuated with the vampire Armand, the leader of a Parisian vampire coven, Claudia becomes once again the third party in a male bond. Her agency is disenfranchised once again, as she is viewed as an obstacle to the new union, with Armand preternaturally enchanting her into stunned silence during their first meeting in order to be alone with Louis. For Lestat, Claudia exists only as an object, while for Armand only as a mindless impediment. This time, however, Louis himself, free now from his feminine role that had stemmed from his relationship with Lestat, sides and identifies with the new male oppressor. As Linda Badley argues, “patriarchy is most despicable
in Armand’s coven, whose abstract Law rigidly enforces outmoded human customs and Biblical prohibitions in the name of social order” (131). Claudia is punished for her attempted murder against Lestat and Louis remains behind as the lover and companion of Armand, who is her executioner. In Rice’s characteristic tendency to pessimism and fascination for the morbid, Claudia learns, in the most brutal manner, that there can be no positive ending for a woman in a male-dominated world, no easy escape from the ever-present bonds of normalized male oppression.

On the basis of all the above, Rice, in her *Interview with the Vampire*, criticizes and examines the toxicity of the conservative nuclear family. The vampiric family unit, oppressive, homicidal, corrupt, and incestuous serves as the perfect metaphor for a societal ideal that is superficially functional but inherently corrupt and problematic under the surface. The most prominent example is the character of Claudia, who, being an adult woman imprisoned in the body of a child, embodies the struggles of a woman in a conservative and patriarchal family unit, infantilized and dependant on her male companions. The members of the family unit, including Claudia, are both human and monstrous, both protagonists and villains, standing both for the monstrous Other and the oppressed self. Rice manages to shed light on certain anxieties as these are communicated to her readers through her conventionally looking but vampiric characters.

1.2 Louis’ Vampirism and Existential Terror

Another major theme in *Interview with the Vampire* is the existential dread of the main characters, the anxiety of a society drifting away from the belief in grand narratives and institutions that until that point stood for stability; this condition is
primarily explored through Louis and his symbolic drifting away from religion brought on by his vampirism.

Rapid technological advancements and post-1945 socio-cultural and political upheavals led to the questioning of metanarratives such as national identity, religion, and objective reality. Following up from World War II and the Holocaust, the horrors of the era, brought on the surface the human capacity for extreme cruelty and violence that permanently affected the collective notion of humanity’s inherent goodness and ability to follow a universally accepted moral code. In order to signify the feeling of being adrift and uncertain that arise out of this shift in consciousness, Rice attempts to shed light on certain contemporary concerns through Louis’ fictionalized experience. To begin with, she draws a parallel between Louis as a man of the Enlightenment who has abandoned superstitious thoughts for the sake of reason, and her contemporary society with regard to the ever growing loss of faith in grand narratives and authoritative institutions. As Yoshitaka Inoue argues, “With the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the basis of human existence came to depend not on God, the mythological world, or the outside, but on human subjectivity and internality” (86). Most importantly, however, she resorts to the use of elements such as Catholic imagery, religious guilt, and the supernatural in order to discuss her contemporary cultural anxieties. As Elizabeth MacAndrew points out in her study *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, Rice “uses the supernatural, as Gothic tradition has always done, to present new views of human nature ambiguously, so we are forced to ask questions about it” (250). She utilizes tradition in order to expose the anxieties of the socio-cultural context her novels emerge from. As Rice has stated herself, while discussing *Interview with the Vampire*,
I am obsessed with the question of how we live [together] in our day and age when the faith in authority symbols is lost. […] My work is filled with these moments, when people are scattered and broken and have to reinvent themselves. As religion loses its hold on people in a magical way, people have to reinvent themselves in terms of new ideas. (Badley 110-19)

This is precisely what Rice is interested in: to reinvent her characters by holding on to their conventional appearance by instilling in them an entirely different frame of mind and system of beliefs.

Louis’ loss of Catholic faith and his existential dread constitutes a good example of a contemporary man being tortured by certain anxieties concerning his loss of faith in institutions and narratives such as religion, national identity, and general structures of authority as well as the subsequent feelings of uncertainty and helplessness that rise as a result of it. Rice uses Louis in the novel as an embodiment of contemporaneity summarized in Armand’s words as follows: “I must make contact with the age, […] And I must do that through you […] This is the very spirit of your age. Don’t you see that? Everyone else feels as you feel. Your fall from grace and faith has been the fall of a century” (Rice 258-59). This observation has obvious metatextual significance, as Louis’ mental state in the eighteenth century is analogous to Rice’s present. Being a devoted Catholic as a mortal, Louis, through his transformation into an immortal vampire, questions his position in the Christian world and in turn the existence of a higher power in any sense. The loss of faith in Catholicism serves as an allegory for the contemporary individual’s loss of faith in all predominant institutions, ideas, and grand narratives, such as national identity, social structures of authority, the objectivity of human history, nature, and religion. The novel’s use of Catholic faith to signify all real life institutions is a direct nod to the
Southern Gothic genre, where Catholic imagery and guilt is a significant element. Rice amplifies the theme of religious anxiety, by employing religious elements throughout the novel. The story is replete with Catholic imagery – “I rather like looking at crucifixes in particular.” (Rice 25) – scenes set in churches, cathedrals or hallowed grounds, descriptions of vampires through Christian metaphors – “He was no more human to me than a biblical angel.” (Rice 19) – and religious sayings or biblical passages dispersed throughout the dialogue, as with the phrase, “Suffer the little children to come unto me” (Rice 122). It could be argued that the Catholic element is utilized here even in excess as a stylistic choice meant to evoke a Southern Gothic feel. The use of vampirism as a reflection of religious anxieties is not new. As Cheryl Holland argues, “While the uncertainties about science were, and still are, reflected in tales of man-made monsters, uncertainties about religion were expressed in perhaps the Gothic’s most famous monster, one with a fear with all things religious: the vampire” (35).³ The trend of the monstrous figure as representative of the political and religious Other has continued in the American Gothic tradition. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues, in his essay “American Monsters,” “A convenient first step in running roughshod over someone is always to label that person or group as a monster. [...] [T]he discourse of monstrosity functions politically to facilitate or retard particular cultural agendas” (42). Rice, however, makes Louis not a representation of the feared religious Other like the vampires of classic Gothic literature, but a benevolent representation of the anxious modern man himself. “This is unhappiness,” he replies to Armand’s statements, “Unhappiness you don’t begin to understand” (Rice 259). Similarly to a contemporary man, he feels alone and adrift

³ See Cheryl Holland’s “Children of Satan/Children of God: Religious Identity and the Vampire in Gothic Literature” for further analysis of the vampire as religious Other in British Gothic fiction.
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while searching for a code of ethics since he is aware and at the same time frightened of his own powers and tendency to kill.

The parallels between Louis’ journey into his immortal life and search for a new and secular moral code with the contemporary individual’s drifting away from any belief in solid social structures begin immediately with the circumstances of his turning into a vampire. Louis comes from a Catholic background and considers himself religious for the most significant part of his life. As Holland argues, Louis eventual status as a lapsed and disillusioned Catholic is a “very twentieth century state of mind” (40). Rice, thus, employs historical and cultural circumstances of the past in order to be able to examine those in her present. The narration begins with a conflict between Louis and his brother, when they were both mortal men, a conflict that arises out of Louis’ brother fanatical religious fervor and insistence on him being the recipient of divine visions. In Louis’ own words, “I was a Catholic; I believed in saints. I lit tapers before their marble statues in churches; I knew their pictures, their symbols, their names. But I didn’t, couldn’t believe my brother. Not only did I not believe he saw visions, I couldn’t entertain the notion for a moment’” (Rice 12). Rice here employs the religious conflict, in order to set the scene for Louis’ character. Louis’ attachment to the church is born more out of a desire to hold on to his status quo and dominant social position than of any real piety. However, Louis’ disbelief derives from his brother’s suicide, a tragedy that has caused Louis to sink into a depression. It is this state of guilt, despair, and vulnerability that pushes Louis to Lestat’s vampirism. This is, thus, the first instance of religious doubt and disbelief in Louis’ life that leads to his complete turning away from God. Since the first moment that Louis looks at Lestat, his view on religion begins to change becoming far more cynical now: “I saw my real gods,” he admits, “The gods of most men. Food, drink
and security in conformity” (Rice 17). This highlights the complete change of his worldview. But it is interesting that his first night as a vampire Louis feels alone, adrift, unable to make a connection with the world around him. For the first time he becomes aware of the mortality, fragility, and finality of people around him, feeling disdain for religious principles that would view their lives as of unequal value. In his own words, “I looked around me at all the mortals that I knew and saw all life as precious, condemning all fruitless guilt and passion that would let it slip through the fingers like sand” (Rice 38). Through Louis’ loss of religious belief, Rice also challenges faith as represented by dominant social institutions and sources of authority.

In opposition to Louis and his need to hold on to set codes of ethics, there is Lestat’s immoral type of atheism. According to Lestat’s view, vampires, as the most dominant living creatures in the absence of a higher power, serving as a metaphor here for humanity, should be allowed to behave in the way that brings them pleasure, with no obligation to a moral code or consideration of the wellbeing of others. “You alone under the rising moon can strike with the hand of god” (Rice 78), Lestat says to Louis during one of their conversations. Louis, however, is not willing to succumb to these instincts. He remains a hopeful idealist who struggles to find the middle ground between the knowledge of himself as the most powerful being in a godless universe and the will to function according to a self-imposed and empathetic moral code. Louis’ fear of his own violent urges causes him to question whether he has the ability to entirely control his own effect in the world around him. In Barbara Frey Waxman’s words, “[t]he vampire Louis is like that still hopeful-existentialist that must confront the compelling postexistentialist outlook which fears that freedom itself is a chimera” (84). Louis maintains the need to believe in the importance of freedom
of choice and moral responsibility. Lestat names the ability to function with no consideration or obligation to those in one’s surroundings termed as the “vampire detachment” (Rice 194). It is this detachment that fuels Lestat’s cynical view of the world around him. While Louis, who is unable to achieve this detachment –“I’m incapable of your detachment.” (Rice 213)– remains an idealist, believing in inherent benevolence and sense of empathy and ethics. As Lloyd Worley argues, “Louis cannot detach himself because he is existentialist, and one of the characteristics of existentialism is that person must not be theoretically detached when confronting the problems that involve the ultimate purpose of the self” (89). Louis’ main endeavor in his immortal life is to discover the truths of his existence, the scientific or preternatural forces that have made him what he is, or at least a larger community of immortals that will teach him their society’s moral codes: “ ‘I don’t pretend to know [what a vampire is],’ he claims to Lestat. ‘I know that after leaving you, I shall try to find out. I’ll travel the world, if I have to, to find other vampires. […] Vampires who understand knowledge as I do and have used their superior vampire nature to learn secrets of which you don’t even dream’” (Rice 76). As he fails to meet another being, human or not, with existential knowledge greater than his own, he is tortured by the existential dread of the secular modern man. He experiences feelings of claustrophobia at the knowledge of being alone in the universe, traveling through life with no deeper knowledge of his own existence:

And suppose the vampire who made you knew nothing, and the vampire that made that vampire knew nothing, and the vampire before him knew nothing, and so it goes back and back, nothing proceeding from nothing, until there is nothing! And we must live with the knowledge that there is no knowledge. (Rice 111).
Through Louis’ existential fears concerning his inexplicable vampiric nature, Rice exposes the postmodern horror of the implications of the loss of belief in all-encompassing institutions emphasized in the text through the constant repetition of the word “nothing.” Louis’ anxieties mirror the real world concerns about whether the rapidly disenfranchised institutions are what holds society together and whether humanity can still exist as a community if there is no longer a metaphysical obligation that holds it together.

A significant instance in Louis’ existential journey is his visit to a New Orleans cathedral shortly after Lestat’s assumed death, an experience that solidifies his internal turning away from religion. Being freed from Lestat’s influence, Louis’ search for existential meaning is intensified. As Lestat functions as a physical representation of Louis’ fear that a secular life is by definition amoral, his death triggers Louis’ brief desire to return to the Catholic fold whose teachings he was not yet able to completely abandon. As Waxman Frey argues, “With traces of Christian belief remaining in him, then, Louis feels guilty about his egotism” (85-86). As he visits the cathedral, due to a desire to return to the comfort of following Christian teachings, he comes to the realization that his turning away from religion is irreversible, as the lack of belief stems from within himself and not external pressure. From the moment he steps into the cathedral, Louis is overwhelmed by a feeling of panic and claustrophobia, bringing to mind a constant and fruitless search: “Suddenly I saw myself searching for the doll, in the relentless and meaningless manner one searches for something in a nightmare, coming on doors that won’t open or drawers that won’t shut, struggling over and over against the same meaningless thing, not knowing why the effort seems so desperate” (Rice 130). The object of Louis’ despair takes the form of a vision of one of Claudia’s old dolls, a symbol of a time of
innocence. His desperate and frantic search for it in his vision is reminiscent of his search for life’s true meaning and need to return to a much simpler and innocent time. And yet, the cathedral does not provide him with the comfort he looks for, as he finds himself not drawn to it as he was in his younger years: “I stared at the statues; I became obsessed suddenly and completely with the lifeless profiles, the staring eyes, the empty hands, the frozen folds. [...] It was a cemetery of dead forms, of funereal effigy and stone angels” (Rice 131). The Catholic images that surround him are reminiscent of death and emptiness, as they no longer inspire awe. Here the Catholic imagery turns into a superficial and empty marker for a belief system that is now dead leaving one feeling empty and adrift. Louis discovers in this way that a return to religion is not possible, as his secularism stems from within himself. Louis comes, finally, to accept the condition of his existence: that he himself and his kin are the ones that rule the world as the highest form of being. In this realization, Louis feels the cathedral crumble before him, all his insistence to hold on to old beliefs is permanently lost: “The cathedral crumbled in my vision. The saints listed and fell. Rats ate the Holy Eucharist and nested on the sills. [...] And I remained standing. Untouched” (Rice 131-32). Louis total turning away from religion and starting to perceive the human, in his case the immortal human, as the center of the world culminates when he is asked to confess to the cathedral’s priest. “Why, if God exists, does He suffer me to exist” (Rice 134), Louis says to the priest, mirroring the belief that humanity’s evil is proof of God’s non-existence. Louis proceeds to murder the priest calmly and with no sign of his characteristic guilt, and by ending the life of one of God’s representatives on Earth, he symbolically ends his last remaining connection to religious thought. His disillusionment is complete. As the priest turns into another nameless human victim, man-made institutions have lost for Louis all metaphysical
value. This fatal visit to the Cathedral is Louis’ last act before he departs from New Orleans, intending to travel the world and seek communion with his own kind.

Louis’ search for existential meaning comes to a close when he comes across the character of Armand in Paris, a vampire who claims to be the most ancient of their kind and yet has no more knowledge of the species’ existence or purpose than Louis himself. Louis travels begin in Eastern Europe, where he comes across mindless undead creatures that are reminiscent of the vampires of European lore. The lack of intelligence of those creatures as well as the extreme religious superstition with which the mortal villagers perceive them, superstitious beliefs of the Old World that Louis as a contemporary man has grown apart from, are mocked and dismissed. They are a nod, one could say, to the vampire figures of classic European Gothic tradition, monsters of an age before modernism, old-fashioned representations of Otherness and evil that Rice dismisses through Louis’ contempt. The encounter is only a brief and insignificant part of his travels. Reaching Paris, however, Louis meets Armand, an older vampire and the leader of a vampiric coven posing as actors in a Parisian theatrical group. Armand and his companions are the first of their kin who Louis and Claudia meet after Lestat. In particular, Armand’s age and intelligence give Louis hope that his existential questionings will be answered and he will be presented with a universal vampiric moral code, a final hope that his lost belief in metaphysical authorities and all-encompassing institutions can be replaced by new structures. Armand, however, possesses no such knowledge. As the oldest living vampire, Louis comes to view him as the most powerful being in the universe, and yet he holds no answers to the origins of humankind or vampirekind: “But I was somehow, to my own bewilderment, empty of all regret,” Louis says now, after this realization. “I am alone, I was thinking. I am alone. It seemed just, perfectly, and so to have a pleasing,
inevitable form. [...] One with the shadows. Without nightmare. An inexplicable peace” (Rice 241). He finds himself initially shocked, and yet drawn and attracted to Armand, representing for him an unrestrained force that can move beyond any restrictive ideologies. Louis’ internal search comes then to a close with the acceptance that there is no mystical knowledge to be gained by any source, no philosophical answer that can be concretely given to questions not yet answered by scientific means.

Louis’ existential anxiety at being the only master of his own code of conduct is replaced by relief when he realizes his uniqueness, therefore the freedom to act on the basis of his own will without being restrained by his vampire “evil” nature. In Terri R. Liberman’s words,

[i]n *Interview with the Vampire*, the vampire is drawn into the moral dilemma of the twentieth century. The question of good and evil is not simple, much as these questions are not simple for mortals in the modern world. Thus, the novel is not only about the philosophical struggles of vampires, but about very human efforts to define difficult moral concepts at a time when evil seems not to have absolute meaning. (Liberman 111-12)

Louis’ anxieties of immortality reflect real world anxieties. Both initiate a loss of stability and belief in narratives and institutions previously considered solid and they mark a traumatic shift in Louis’ worldview and consciousness. Through her vampiric characters, Rice discusses the anxieties of her own present, having to do with the change of attitude of the collective American consciousness towards institutions of authority, a shift that had been triggered by the publicization of events such as the Watergate scandal, the public dissent with America’s involvement in the Vietnam war, and the rising fights for liberation and equality of various marginalized social groups.
On the basis of what has been analyzed in this chapter, Rice infuses her writing with a new breath of life by making the vampiric monstrous Other the main narrative voice. Not only is the vampire the narrator, but he is stripped off his monstrous Otherness, the true monster of the tale often being the dominant ideologies and institutions themselves. Furthermore, the symbolic roles of the characters overlap and become blurred, as the threads of the narrative in the novel are intertwined. Characters function as both representations of oppressive institutions and victims of them, both as monsters and heroes, both as Other and their own individual self. This indeterminate way of writing defeats the idea of an objective distinction between good and evil. In particular, racial issues, guilt of slave-owning and the anxieties of the New World are here examined on a superficial level, despite their significance in the novel’s historical setting. The past is employed merely as a means through which much more contemporary concerns are discussed.

Influenced by the second wave of feminism, Rice employs the vampiric family unit in order to examine the real life oppression, inequality, and toxic relationships within the nuclear family, an often idealized topic in the conservative America of her time. The true dark secret of the preternatural family is neither their vampirism nor the danger that they pose to their surrounding society, but their own victimization in each other’s hands. The concept of the monstrous Other is thus reformulated. The most prominent manifestation of this aspect of the narrative can be found in the character of Claudia, the female vampire who is forever trapped in the body of a child. She is devoid of a voice in the narrative, dependent on her male companions and demonized by Louis not for her vampiric violent nature but for her unwillingness to accept the ubiquity of patriarchal ideals that demand her submission.
As for Louis’ loss of Catholic faith brought on by his vampirism, it functions as a symbolic representation of contemporary reality’s terrors: the questioning of national identity, the subjectivity of history and human nature, faith in authorities and religion create feelings of emptiness and hopelessness. Through the use of the supernatural and the macabre, Rice resorts to the vampiric past in order to discuss the present, which opens up her novel to multiple readings and interpretations. This amalgamation grants her writing with a new purpose of existence, as it allows her to apply old conventions for the examination of contemporary social anxieties and concerns.
CHAPTER 2

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE MONSTROUS OTHER
IN ANNE RICE’S THE VAMPIRE LESTAT

2. The Vampire as a Reflection of 1980’s America

Anne Rice’s The Vampire Lestat, the second novel of the Vampire Chronicles, resorts to the use of monstrous and inhuman characters serving as representations of social Otherness. Lestat, the novel’s narrator and protagonist, stands for the sexually divergent social groups in a manner that makes society and not his inhuman nature the oppressive and dominant Other. As for Gabrielle, Lestat’s mortal mother, Rice associates her vampirism with a general disillusionment with social constructs that leads her to willingly becoming a social alien.

The novel was published in 1985, nine years after Interview with the Vampire, as its sequel. The story is narrated through Lestat’s point of view, his own transformation into a vampire, and his journey into immortality prior to the events narrated in Interview with the Vampire. The narration begins with Lestat’s life as the mortal and youngest son of an impoverished aristocratic family in the French countryside of the eighteenth century. Rejected from the majority of his family, Lestat moves to Paris together with his companion, Nicolas, in order to pursue a career in the theater. It is in Paris where he is abducted by a senior vampire who introduces him by force to immortality. The journey of his transformation is narrated in the novel, which also includes the turning of Nicolas and Gabrielle, Lestat’s mortal mother, into vampires, an encounter with the vampire Armand and his coven of religious vampires, and his wandering around the globe in search of company for the rest of his immortal life. The style of The Vampire Lestat differs from its predecessor novel, in that it
relinquishes the outdated vocabulary and linear narration of *Interview with the Vampire* for the sake of a more contemporary style based on flashbacks and a subjective narrator.

Early reviews of the novel have been highly mixed. While a number of them continued commenting on Rice’s ornate prose as well as tendency to overt sentimentality, others considered these characteristics to be vital in the effective development of the novel’s narrative. As Michiko Kakutani wrote in her 1985 review of the novel for *The New York Times*, “[r]ead *The Vampire Lestat*, in fact, is a lot like spending an entire day in a museum featuring only works by Henry Fuseli - all hung in heavy, gilt frames decorated with curlicues and malicious cherubs. By the end, you're reeling from both the strangeness and the surfeit of ornamentation” (16). Reviewers also praised the element of humor and extravagant performativity that distinguishes *The Vampire Lestat* from *Interview with the Vampire*. Rice has continued to be celebrated, even in her second novel, for breathing new life into the myth of the vampire by bringing them to the forefront of the narration as likeable social outsiders. It has been, however, after the film adaptation of the first novel in the series⁴ that her readership of the original novels have grown and academic commentaries have ensued.

Despite the stylistic differences from *Interview with the Vampire*, Rice’s second novel still resorts to the use of conventional gothic elements even though it touches upon indirectly on the contemporary social-political reality. *The Vampire Lestat* is characterized by its preternatural elements and imagery of ancient castles, dark forests, underground crypts and cemeteries, decay and death. The vampiric condition is, once again, employed as a symbolic representation of human traits and

characteristics that could mark one as a marginalized member of society, albeit in a highly deconstructed way. The plantation setting of the previous novel is discarded. However, the themes of dark family secrets, madness, and domestic abjection are significant elements of the narrative. The fictionalized eighteenth century setting is employed as an allegorical background in order to examine issues of Rice’s contemporary present. The sentimental and ornate language of Gothic fiction is employed, however, in a self-aware manner, while the linear narrative of the previous novel is abandoned for the sake of flashbacks and an admittedly subjective narrator.

In the Gothic tradition, monstrosity is often utilized to represent social Otherness and divergence from acceptable norms, a convention heavily deconstructed by Rice in *The Vampire Lestat*. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues, discussing the idea of monstrosity in American fiction, “A convenient first step in running roughshod over someone is always to label that person or group as a monster. […] any kind of somatic or social difference can be exaggerated into monstrous aberration and the discourse of monstrosity functions politically to facilitate or retard particular cultural agendas” (42). The convention of depicting Otherness as inhuman has traditionally been employed as a method of disenfranchising and depriving social groups of their agency. Rice subverts the convention in order to examine contemporary issues pertaining to non-conforming sexual and gender identities in relation to the established societal norms, as is the case with the marginalized and demonized queer community in the U. S. at the time of the AIDS epidemic. Thus, Rice gifts her non-human characters with a narrative voice. As a result, vampirism gains a positive rather than frightening connection with sexuality, being associated instead with self liberation, a desire for acceptance and visibility, and a celebration of individuality. The true villain and monster of the tale is often, for Rice, the dominant
voice in society, whose anxieties are nothing more than a means of oppression and victimization of marginalized social groups. In an era when divergent sexuality is violently demonized, Rice empowers her vampires and elevates them in terms of status.

As regards the social context of the era period during which the novel is published, the main, perhaps, event is the AIDS crisis that devastated the queer community in the 1980s in the U.S. The perception of homosexual men as dangerous and threatening to their surroundings due to the epidemic, being named the ‘gay plague’, is one of the main issues that have sparked the writing of this novel. As Linda Badley argues, “with [the novel’s] combination of erotic intensity, danger, and denial, Rice is conscious already in 1985 of writing about and for homosexuals in the age of AIDS. The Vampire Chronicles would become a sort of journal of the plague years” (124). The demonstrations and liberation movements in the name of the rights of the gay and transgender communities that have risen in the U. S. in the echo of the epidemic, as well as the increasing prominence of queer studies as an academic field have had an impact on Rice’s writing. The perception and self-perception of individuals of non-conforming sexual and gender identities in the face of oppressive patriarchy is reflected in the marginalized vampiric characters in The Vampire Lestat.

Rice’s own perception of her gender as non-conforming as well as her examination of gender in relation to dysphoria and claustrophobia fuel the writing of the particular novel as well as the conceptualization of certain characters, as is the case of Lestat and Gabrielle. Katherine Ramsland notes that “Anne soon grew aware of how attuned she was to the aesthetic of gay men […] and she began to think of herself as a gay man in a woman’s body” (17). Gabrielle then in The Vampire Lestat serves as a medium through which the anti-conformist reactions to norms enforced by
the dominant society can be explored. Gabrielle’s discomfort with societal roles and perceptions eventually gender binaries, moral codes, and societal restrictions. Her disillusionment serves a double purpose; in the story’s context, it exposes her reactionary character, which emerges due to her own oppression, while on a metatextual level it is used by Rice in order to shed light on contemporary societal concerns and anxieties.

2.1 Lestat’s Vampiric Condition as Divergent Sexuality in the 1980’s

Being a symbolic representation of the collective homosexual male, Lestat features in the novel as the sexual stranger who opposes social norms through Rice’s technique of giving Lestat, who is the social and sexual vampiric Other, a voice, in a genre twist in which the dominant society itself is the monster. As has been the case in traditional gothic fictions, the inhuman and monstrous figure stands as a representation of the sexual stranger as opposed to the norms of the dominant society. Here, however, it is Lestat’s vampiric condition that works as a liberating force in the context of his newly-discovered desire for visibility, freedom of expression, and acceptance.

As Rice comments, Lestat is one of the “symbolic outsiders,” who takes on “the burden of all our irrational drives and helps us act all of that out” (Rice qtd. in Badley 118). The lines between the symbolic Other and the self are blurred here. Usually, it is the conventionally marginalized individual, the Gothic monster, that is in possession of a narrative voice. Driven away from his family home, in which he was perceived as an outsider, Lestat builds a new life as a vampire in Paris. What commences as an internal struggle between his old and marginalized self and his newly-acquired vampiric identity, it gradually develops into a growing urge of
making visible his non-conforming self. This internal awakening, combined with his perception by society as being both ideal and a monstrous ‘Other’, functions as a metaphor of the experiences of individuals of alternative sexual orientations, particularly homosexual men, have had at the time of the AIDS ‘plague’ in the U. S. In an era where homosexual men are persecuted and demonized, Rice deconstructs gothic conventions in order to place the social Other, represented in the genre by an inhuman entity, as the hero of the tale.

This is exactly where the significance of the Gothic lies since it has been traditionally associated with divergent sexuality and sexual anxieties. Gothic narratives deal with repression as well as with the themes of fear and anxiety and the way they mingle with unspoken desires. The figure of the vampire, as George E. Haggerty argues in his “Anne Rice and the Queering of Culture,” “represents the return of the repressed in a culturally significant way: both inside culture and outside, both a charmingly honest man and a wickedly deceptive one, both the phallic aggressor and the always already penetrated one, the vampire represents everything that the culture desires and everything that it fears” (9). What Haggerty suggests here underlines the otherness and deviance that characterizes vampiric sexuality. Vampires appear to be a threat to the dominant society’s values since their actions and personality stand for the awakening of one’s own repressed desires. In other words, vampires occupy, as Andrew Schopp suggests, “a ‘paraxic’ world, a space that exists both inside and outside of our world” (233) that manifests itself through their acts of overt, aggressive and inappropriate – as dictated by societal norms – sexuality. Their bite, imbued with heavy sexual connotations, is impossible to resist. Their biological inability to procreate, despite their being sexually active, is also a factor that marks them as symbolic representations of non-conforming sexuality. The vampire’s
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inherent association with divergent and often threatening sexuality, combined with the gothic tendency to label outsider social groups as monstrous, would make the vampire figure an easy choice for the symbolic representative of homosexual males, a social group highly demonized in the U. S. of the 1980’s. In Rice’s *The Vampire Lestat*, however, the convention is subverted in order for Lestat, whose vampirism becomes intertwined in meaning with his status as a homosexual man, to possess a powerful narrative voice. In a twist in which both traditional narratives and the status quo of normativity are questioned, Lestat is the hero of the tale while the oppressive normativity of the dominant society is the true monster. The vampire, as the sexual Other, becomes the narration’s benevolent protagonist, has his own voice, fights against social injustice and marginalization with regard to his condition in favor of sexual freedom, visibility, and social acceptance. Despite the association of vampiric sexuality with blood and disease transmission as part of the socio-cultural context of the AIDS epidemic, Rice’s vampire is presented as bold, extravagant and charismatic, determined to be visible and accepted for who he really is. In a sense, Rice brings the marginalized vampire to the center of the action granting him or her a first-person narrative voice.

In the case of Lestat, his life as a mortal man is characterized by repression and an enforced sexual normativity. The narrative in the novel begins with Lestat as a mortal young man, living in an oppressive aristocratic household while attempting to conform to societal norms rather than be accosted the stigma of an outsider. As the youngest son of an impoverished family of the eighteenth century French aristocracy, Lestat spends the majority of his mortal life in his family’s derelict countryside castle, serving as the proper gothic setting traditionally associated with oppression and stifling patriarchal authority. The castle is described by Rice as a monument to the
now impoverished family’s former power as well as an ominous setting associated with the exultation of traditional, even though violent, male pursuits: “Our castle was full of old armour. My ancestors had fought in endless noble wars since the times of the Crusades with St. Louis. And hung on the walls above all this clattering junk were a good many lances, battleaxes, flails and maces” (Rice 24). Rice abandons the plantation setting of the previous novel for a European setting. All of Lestat’s early attempts to escape his household include his desire for a lifestyle alternative to the one mandated by the society he lives in. The most notable occasion being his attempt to join a traveling theater troupe, a group of people that he associates with sexual freedom and his natural urge to perform. These attempts are rejected and severely punished: “I was beaten severely, and when I cursed everyone, I was beaten again” (Rice 35).

In response, Lestat assumes the role of the traditional heterosexual male. Presenting himself as a hunter, financial provider for his household, lord to his people, and desired lover known for his sexual relations with women, Lestat attempts to reduce his visibility as a man of a non-conforming sexual orientation by taking on a patriarchal role. He becomes the main provider to his family – “I had become the hunter. I brought in the pheasant, the venison and the trout from the mountain streams – whatever was needed and could be got – to feed the family” (Rice 23) – in order to counterbalance his outcast status within it. His journey to visibility begins when he meets Nicolas, the son of a local draper. Nicolas is embittered by patriarchal oppression and the roles it dictates, with his family turning against his decision to be a professional musician: “He’s in disgrace. You know he’s been educated all his life to be a little imitation aristocrat. […] He wants to be a musician. He was playing in the upstairs bedroom over the shop. Everyone could hear him, and his father was
threatening to break his hands” (Rice 43). Nicolas’ artistic endeavor is perceived here as a disruption to the conformity of the community. The true issue seems to be Nicolas’ unwillingness to conceal his non-conformity, with the family’s public image being of greater significance than the violent suppression he has to undergo as regards his personal life. During Lestat and Nicolas’ first meeting, Nicolas conspiratorially says to Lestat, “I too am impossible, Monsieur” (Rice 42), a metaphor for their shared divergent sexuality. This meeting is the beginning of their romantic relationship that becomes the catalyst for both of them: they depart for Paris together in order to pursue careers in acting and music, a decision that results in Lestat, and later Nicolas, being turned into vampires. For Lestat the turning marks the beginning of his true self-liberation, a liberation that Nicolas, embittered by his upbringing and his family’s insistence on a public image on conformity, can’t achieve. Not fitting Rice’s positive twist on vampirism as a representation of divergent sexuality, he fades out in the narrative.

Within the novel’s socio-cultural context, Rice employs a positive interpretation of inhuman nature allegorically standing for non-conforming sexuality and thus, for Lestat, vampirism marks a step towards self-acceptance both personally and publicly. It is no coincidence, that the scene of Lestat’s turning is set not in his family’s estate, but in Paris. Having escaped from the derelict castle, being a symbol of patriarchal authority and status quo, he lives with his male partner, Nicolas, and pursues a career as an actor, a lifestyle alternative to his aristocratic upbringing, Lestat has already taken the first step towards self-liberation. In particular, the change in geographical setting is of major significance in the novel, since Lestat’s liberating voyage constitutes a central theme in the gothic tradition. In Irving Malin’s words, “if the castle represents an old and frequently haunted pattern, the voyage signifies, in
contrast, an attempt to leave traditional forms. It embodies a quest away from authoritarian confines” (152). Throughout the novel, Paris stands for Rice as place of both literal and internal liberation, an idealized location where characters dream of achieving, and eventually achieve, liberation from oppressive sociocultural bonds. “The important thing is to get there” (Rice 63), Lestat exclaims early in the novel, an accurate statement as it is after his arrival to Paris that the main part of the narrative commences. Paris is the city of a refined and liberal lifestyle serving as the perfect juxtaposition to the oppressive gothic castle Lestat escapes from. It is in this new setting that Lestat’s turning into a vampire takes place. Lestat is abducted from the bedroom that he shares with his lover by another male vampire in a scene that is rife with sexual implications: “Once again he pulled me to himself. […] And he drew closer and the teeth went through my flesh. […] I was nothing but pleasure. […] ‘Please, don’t stop it…’” (Rice 88-89). The vampire’s attack is described here as an intimate act of physical euphoria. Despite his initial reluctance and shame, Lestat comes to enjoy the interaction, setting the scene for his later attitude to his vampiric nature, marked by self-acceptance and a desire for visibility and liberation. As Badley argues, “Becoming a vampire in Rice’s novels means transcending socially constructed sexuality to realize one’s sexual nature completely” (123). Lestat’s vampiric condition immediately becomes connected with his non-conforming sexual identity.

However, his vampiric status will initiate an internal and external battle against old admonitions that push him to the margins of society as the only viable option for his non-conforming identity. For Rice, one’s switch into vampirism denotes, not a threatening social divergence, but the beginning of a journey into self-acceptance, liberation, and a newly-awoken desire to make visible one’s true identity.
Rice achieves this positive twist on the perception of inhumanity and monstrosity through the representation of vampirism not as a condition, but as a divergence from the norm. Phrases like “the real ones” (Rice 542) that denote a brotherhood between vampires and “vampire parlance” (151) that imply a sense of community are often used by Lestat. He is in awe of his own preternatural qualities and described vampirism in terms of beauty: “I kept glancing at him and away from him, as if his green eyes were hurting me. […] Deadly and delicate he seemed. His victims had always loved him” (Rice 528). Lestat experiences none of the self-deprecation for his vampiric condition that Louis does in Interview with the Vampire and does not perceive vampirism as immoral; in fact, vampirism is not discussed in the novel in terms of inherent morality at all. Lestat’s personality is not affected by his transformation and the tone of the narrative remains unchanged. As it will be examined further down. Lestat’s monstrosity is only projected upon him by his surroundings. Rice’s connection of vampirism with divergent sexual Otherness differs from the demonizing effect this connection takes on in more traditional vampire narratives as it is the key that allows her to employ Lestat as a symbol through which to explore her contemporary society’s issues pertaining to sexual identity from the point of view of the social outsider himself.

The theme that characterizes Lestat’s life as a vampire throughout the novel is the struggle between old established rules that push one to the margins of society and the newly-discovered desire to be a visible part of it. Soon after his turning, Lestat is torn between shame and pride due to his new emerging self: “But how could a monster feel joy?” (Rice 112). Marveling at his own feelings of pride and elation towards what society views as monstrous — “I could fool mortals!” he thinks. ‘I could move among them!'” (Rice 115)—Lestat places himself within a privileged but
liminal position. This becomes evident when Lestat encounters Armand’s coven of religious vampires, who reside in the Paris catacombs in self-imposed impoverishment. As in *Interview with the Vampire*, Armand represents the maintaining of the patriarchal order and status quo, albeit here in a different way, which gives Rice the opportunity to question patriarchal normativity and not the victims of its oppression. Lestat is abducted and trialed by Armand’s coven early in his vampirism, accused of the crime of visibility due to his attempt to live as an active member of society, an act that they deem abominable: “He was not buried!” one of them claims. “Rather he dares to roam the world in the guise of a living being! And in the midst of Paris conducts business as a mortal man!” (Rice 218). Armand’s vampires are indoctrinated into believing their own existence and identity to be a sin, a crime against the laws of nature and humanity. They consider their place to be in the margins of society, fearful of humanity’s hatred and wrath against them. Their beliefs mirror Rice’s contemporary marginalization and demonization of the queer community in the face of the AIDS epidemic, as well as the fear that individuals of non-conforming sexuality face that forces them to make their identity invisible. According to their worldview, Lestat is not merely daring for his desire to be an active member of society, but a miscreant, posing as a threat to the safety of the vampires’ invisibility and maintenance of their status quo. He is considered a “blasphemer” and a “cursed profaner” (Rice 210) and it is lamented that “the secrecy [they] have protected for centuries was broken for his amusement and the amusement of a common crowd” (Rice 220).

Rice continues to employ a hyperbolic, sentimental, and religiously-charged language, that we usually find in traditional Gothic fiction, but with a twist. Lestat refuses to be the perpetrator of his own marginalization and demands his right to fight
for his place in the society of mortal men, to be visible, safe, and accepted by all. He confronts the other vampires by saying: “‘the whole [philosophy] is founded upon a lie,’[…]‘And you cower like peasants, in hell already by your own choosing, enchained more surely than the lowest mortal, and you wish to punish us because we do not? Follow our examples because we do not!’” (Rice 220). His self-assurance that derives from these lines compromises the coven’s beliefs. Most of its members are inspired to follow Lestat’s example and thus the coven dissolves. Lestat’s first major act as a vampire is to question the belief that individuals of non-conforming identities should be hidden in the shadows and margins of society. Rice continues to employ vampirism as a vessel of exploring perceptions of non-conforming sexuality. Lestat’s ornate language above, replete with religious imagery of hell and damnation is reminiscent of conservative views on homosexuality. Rice uses Lestat in order to challenge traditional conceptions of Otherness, as well as subvert any connection between socially divergent sexuality and monstrosity. Not only does Lestat possess a voice, but also a voice that calls for equality and liberation in a manner that corresponds to sexuality-based oppression in the real world. As a result, Lestat becomes an inspiration for his brothers and sisters ‘in the blood’ in their effort to demand their own visibility and right to a comfortable equal life. He functions here as the force that fights for liberation, metaphorically representing all those who have suffered from social exclusion and marginalization due to the AIDS epidemic.

For Lestat thus, this first step of merely living among mortals as one of their own is not enough; he demands true visibility and respect for his identity. The elation he feels for being able to ‘fool’ mortals into accepting him as one of their own by concealing his vampiric nature soon becomes stifling. Lestat asks, “If you can dance with them, and play billiards with them and talk with them, then why can’t you
dwell among them, just the way you did when you were living? [...] And enter again into the very fabric of life” (Rice 126), which also reveals his deep-seated desire for true acceptance. However, Nicholas, now being a vampire himself, considers this kind of effort too superficial or simply “a mockery of all things sacred” (Rice 265), due to the embitterment and hopelessness he experiences from his own social marginalization. As Haggerty argues, “what Nicolas preaches is the invisibility of the gay man, the ease with which he can work his way into the hearts and into the pocketbooks of the society that takes him as one of his own” (7). For Lestat, however, posing as a mortal is not true liberation, as for the liberation movements of the 1980’s, invisibility and social acceptance as a result of a forced heteronormativity is not true equality. Lestat is optimistic and self-assured, willing to take action for the sake of his own acceptance and visibility.

This desire manifests itself in the narrative as a literal performance in the way Lestat sets out to publicize and normalize his identity. The mortal audience’s reaction to his displaying his preternatural nature in the form of a performance both literally and metaphorically represents as well as criticizes society’s intense and violent reaction towards the queer community during the crisis of the 1980’s. Lestat’s first performance as a member of the undead is an attempt to rejoin on stage the theater troupe he was a member of as a mortal man, an incident marked by an intense audience reaction to his newly transformed identity. The audience’s initial reaction to the immortal actor is admiration and awe as regards his supernaturally good looks and agility: “‘You’re handsome enough, now let’s see some action!’ [...] Applause came immediately. [...] Gasps rose from the audience. The little crowd in the wings was stunned. [...] Shouts and cheers broke out over the clapping” (Rice 136-37). As he begins to display his true preternatural physical skills, however, revealing himself as
an individual divergent of the norm, the audience’s elation turns into terror: “Pandaemonium. Shrieks, curses, all stumbling and struggling towards the doors. Curtains were pulled from their fastenings. Men dropped down from the gallery to rush to the street” (Rice 138). Lestat is commanded due to the audience’s rage to leave the stage, while a panicked audience member shoots at him. Although he displays no threatening actions or hints of violence, he is rejected due to his inhumane actions and his failure to be part of a normative community.

The same crowd that hailed him at the start of the performance now is enraged against him when his true and real self is revealed. The juxtaposition that Rice creates highlights the fact that it is the imposition of societal norms that is the true villain rather than the inhuman Other. However, the audience at the sight of Lestat’s non-conforming nature reacts violently as the phrases, “their hands clamped to their sides of their heads” and “[t]heir mouths were grimaces, toneless screams” (Rice 138) reveal, which becomes threatening to his physical wellbeing, even though he never threatened them by his existence. The passage is, thus, an ironic criticism to the AIDS panic of the conservative American society of the 1980’s and the marginalization, violence, and lack of access to medical treatment that the gay community faced as the result of the dominant society’s feelings of being threatened by it. What is displayed in the passage is the idealization of a young, handsome, well-groomed young man, coupled with suspicion and readiness to perceive him as potentially monstrous and threatening. Through the audience reaction that Rice communicates to her readers through the pages of her novel, she indirectly reveals to us the animosity young gay men have encountered at the time of the AIDS outbreak. As Haggerty argues,

[the sexually active male] represents the healthy alternative to the body weakened by AIDS; the always already coupled family man; the captain in
the silent army against drugs. At the same time he also threatens to be gay: the model or actor might just defy all the demands that are being placed on him and love another man. (10)

The audience’s reaction to Lestat comes to represent the anxieties of a dominant society that oscillates between fear and conformity towards anything that differs from the established status quo.

It is important to note, that the novel’s epilogue, after the end of the plot’s conclusion, features another, vastly different, performance by Lestat, one marked by intercommunity acceptance and feelings of brotherhood. Removed from the main novel’s eighteenth century setting, the epilogue is set in 1980s America, which constitutes the novel’s contemporary cultural setting. Lestat, having survived through centuries, performs as a musician in the city of San Francisco. The location is of symbolic significance due to the city’s significant role in the promotion of gay rights, often known as the ‘gay Mecca of the world’. Unlike the theater performance, the audience in 1980’s San Francisco is cheerful and enthusiastic, which fills Lestat with a sense of elation and self-assurance: “Euphoria. Deafening applause” (Rice 540). Lestat does not seem to be afraid to show through his words and actions his non-human identity: “‘I AM TELLING YOU I AM A VAMPIRE’” (Rice 541), he declares to the audience. A significant factor in the change of atmosphere is the existence in the scene and among the members of the audience other fellow vampires who Lestat perceives as his brothers: “I saw them for the first time, the real ones out there. Tiny white faces tossed like masks on the waves of shapeless mortal faces, distinct as Magnus’s face had been in that long-ago little boulevard hall” (Rice 542). In this scene, Rice is keen on creating a sense of brotherhood between vampires, a choice that contributes to her positive representation of Otherness. Vampirism is
presented as a society that needs to unify itself against its social rejection. Rice achieves this here through the use of language such as “the real ones” and “reveal yourselves” (Rice 542), phrases that imply a need for brotherhood, unification, and visibility. The vampires themselves are, for Lestat, the most important members of the audience. The concert is a liberating act for the oppressed community itself rather than a show for the masses of the majority. Considering the novel’s symbolic context, in which vampirism is intertwined with non-conforming sexuality, Rice’s choice of tone suggests a prioritization of first-person voices of queer experiences when it comes to the community’s needs and struggles. What matters here is that Lestat performs for the sake of his own community, not merely for the curious conforming crowd in his effort to empower and encourage the younger generation to believe in themselves and not hide behind society’s shadows. Lestat serves in this manner as the spokesperson of the gay liberation movement of the 1980s.

As a result, Rice in *The Vampire Lestat*, inspired by the AIDS epidemic and the liberation movements that followed, employs the vampiric condition as an elaborate analogy for non-conforming sexuality. For her, the sexual outsider and marginalized ‘monster’ becomes the protagonist, the true monster of the narrative being the oppressive ideology of the dominant society itself. Throughout the novel, Lestat tries to overcome both internally and externally old perceptions that wish to push him to the margins of society while acknowledging his newly-discovered need to be visible and accepted. The narrative both discusses the perception of gay men as a threat to the status quo especially of the mainstream society and applauds the community’s inspiring fight for equality and visibility.
2.2 The Vampire Gabrielle as the Willing Social Other

Another significant character in Rice’s *The Vampire Lestat* is the character of Gabrielle, whose vampiric nature becomes meaningfully intertwined initially with her non-conforming gender identity. Entering the narrative as a middle-aged and diseased woman in an unhappy aristocratic marriage, Gabrielle appears to be repressed in her enforced femininity. Her eventual turning into a vampire by her son, Lestat, stands for an opportunity for her to reawaken into a newly-discovered freedom of gender self-expression.

Gabrielle’s vampirism is associated with internal liberation and an escape from the norms enforced by the dominant society. As Andrew Schopp argues, “[t]he vampire’s sexual otherness both reflects and fosters a desire to break free from sexual constraints, while its immortality reflects and fosters a desire to break free from physical constraints” (233). She begins dressing and behaving as a male, refuses to be called mother, denies her mortal family, and eventually abandons all trappings of her contemporary society, deeming them man-made constructs that are unnecessary for her existence. Gabrielle’s vampirism can be seen as a reaction to certain restrictions and codes of ethics. Instead of her being the vampiric Other, she willingly turns into a threatening social alien. As a result, Gabrielle’s vampirism is analogous to Lestat’s since she moves beyond female victimhood in order to emerge as an empowered vampire being. The female protagonist is for Rice neither an unwitting victim of a male vampire, nor punished for her sexuality after her transformation. She becomes a vampire by her own choice and she is in possession of as much agency as her male counterpart, Lestat. She willingly embraces her Otherness while being a sympathetic, multifaceted, and respected character in the narrative.
Since her mortal years, Gabrielle appears as a repressed outsider, resenting both her assigned gender roles and all societal norms that restrict one’s conduct. Her husband, Lestat’s father, is violent and authoritative, functioning in the narrative as a symbol of toxic masculinity and patriarchal rule. She is the mother only to sons, most of whom she resents for being the outcome of her oppression. “I think she hated to be called mother,” Lestat observes early in the novel (Rice 40). She is terminally ill with tuberculosis, a fact that restricts her movements and does not allow her to escape from the domestic sphere. She is quiet, detached from her family while she often appears to be fond of intellectual pursuits: “one of the things that endeared her to me always was that she never said anything ordinary” (Rice 30). Lestat reminisces of Gabrielle. “‘Shut the door’, ‘Eat your soup’, ‘Sit still’, things like that never passed her lips. She read all the time; in fact, she was the only one in our family that had any education, and when she did speak it was really to speak” (Rice 30). Gabrielle’s intellectual interests are presented by Rice as a sign of independency and non-conformity. Her pursuits come in direct contrast to her domestic duties and motherhood.

Gabrielle’s divergence from a traditional motherly role is framed as positive by Lestat, the narrator, as he perceives it through the point of view of a fellow social and sexual outsider. To the reader, however, she seems to be lacking any parental concern and affection. Gabrielle’s apparent timidity and passivity are not, as will be examined, responding to her true personality, but they are a product of the enforced feminine standards dictated by her social milieu. This portrayal goes against depictions of femininity in traditional vampire narratives which, as Jennifer A. Swartz-Levine argues, focus on “the pure, virtuous non-sexualized female” (345). Her portrayal here as a heavily oppressed and unhappy mortal woman significantly contributes to her subsequent vampiric transformation which is the outcome of her
own decision and free will and not of her victimization by a vampire as it usually happens with the female characters in the traditional vampire stories. The convention of the vilification of liberated female sexuality and aggression is entirely discarded, as Gabrielle’s later emancipation and liberation from repression, which is perceived as a burden rather than a virtue, is pictured as a positive outcome of her vampirism. It is only Lestat who she feels connected with, to whom she confesses her resentment for her acquired family due to the oppression it exercises on her. She dreams of liberating herself and leading a lifestyle different to the one imposed on her due to her class rank:

“You know what I imagine”, she admits,

“Not so much the murdering of them as an abandon that disregards them completely. I imagine drinking wine until I’m so drunk I take off my clothes and bathe in the mountain streams naked.” […] “And then I imagine going into the village, and up into the inn and taking into my bed any men that come there […] without a thought of what happens to your father and your brothers, whether they are alive or dead. In that moment I am purely myself. I belong to no one.” (Rice 39)

Gabrielle emerges from this narrative as an empowered and defiant female whose words and actions are incompatible with her previous appearance as a quiet intellectual, an image that corresponds to established social norms. She fantasizes, not only a liberation from femininity, domesticity, and gender normativity, but a complete break from all codes of social acceptability. The language that Rice chooses to use in order to examine Gabrielle’s desire for physical and mental liberation is highly sexualized. The way Gabrielle envisions her ideal self moves beyond gothic conventions that often present female characters to be exulted as virtuous due to their
repression, while demonizing their sexuality and assertiveness that a vampiric transformation would bring to the surface. Rice, however, normalizes rather than demonizes female sexuality by framing it as a self-liberating fantasy of a still mortal aristocratic woman.

Gabrielle’s need goes beyond liberation from sexual and gender norms, as she expresses an early desire to disregard all social constructs and the necessity to behave according to a set of man-made rules of acceptability. Even Lestat himself, a fellow outsider to patriarchal norms, is taken aback by her confession, not having realized the extent to which her personality had been repressed. Her dissatisfaction with codes of socially acceptable conduct superficially mirrors a character’s tendency, as this is evidenced in traditional gothic writing, to irrationality and inability to overcome perverse thought. The relation to the convention is, however, subverted; as it will be studied later her disillusionment alludes to her inner need to transgress restrictive societal norms which is communicated to us through her vampiric transformation.

Lestat, Gabrielle’s youngest son, functions as her only ally as well as the embodiment of her fantasy of being male. They have private talks during which she confesses to him her true desires, and he is the only person in her family who she acts affectionately towards: “I had a great and unshakeable love of her. I don’t think anyone else did. […] [T]here was a powerful understanding between us. […] Miracles she’d worked for me, though no one around us had ever noticed” (Rice 30-31). She feels akin to him, as they both fail to conform to sexual and gender societal norms and are imprisoned in their patriarch confines. Their connection, however, is for Gabrielle far more multifaceted than the one she has with anyone else. As it will be shown further down in the chapter, Gabrielle identifies more with the masculine than with her assigned feminine role. She lives vicariously through Lestat and his assumed
masculine roles as a hunter, provider, and lord to the villagers: “She spoke in an almost eerie way of my being a secret part of her anatomy, of my being the organ for her which women do not really have” (Rice 62). As Janice Doane and Devon Hodges argue,

because of his position he is filled with rage—his most salient characteristic—and he identifies with his mother, who is also filled with rage. Lestat is her favorite, and she is the one responsible for providing him with ways to prove his masculinity. (428-29)

As she feels that the end of her mortal life is approaching, she aids him in his escape from their family’s castle in order to pursue the lifestyle that he desires in Paris: “‘You are the man in me,’ she confesses to him. ‘And so I’ve kept you here, afraid of living without you, and maybe now in sending you away, I am only doing what I have done before’” (Rice 62). She implies in her last statement that her desire to see him liberated is not merely due to her understanding of his repression, but in order for her to feel liberated through him. She sends him thus to Paris in her stead. In this manner, Lestat, the man in her as she calls him, will achieve freedom from patriarchal confines, an undertaking that is not physically viable for her.

Gabrielle’s turn into vampirism, as is the case with Lestat as well, liberates her from any restrictive societal norms and helps her discover the freedom of self-expression. It is significant that her turning takes place in Paris, the novel’s symbolic setting of liberation, where she initially arrives in order to see her son before her death by consumption. Lestat is informed about her arrival by the following words, “‘You are keeping her alive, Monsieur. She must see you before she closes her eyes’” (Rice 147), which indirectly connect her own life with her son’s. Lestat’s decision to grant her immortality saves not merely her life, but herself from the patriarchal bonds that
have forced her into an unwanted traditionally feminine role. She immediately begins to behave differently than she did as a mortal woman, startling Lestat. She becomes bold and assertive, displaying a short temper that she did not seem to possess earlier in life and quickly proves herself to be a more ruthless and violent hunter and killer of humans than Lestat himself: “‘She was colder than I,’ Lestat observes in awe as she watches her take the life of a mortal man. ‘She was better at all of it’” (Rice 171). She therefore assumes a dominant role, making decisions for the both of them, a role that contradicts her passive nature as an aristocratic mortal woman. Her ruthlessness follows, in a superficial manner, gothic conventions of the monstrous feminine in which the inhuman female figure discards timid femininity in favor of a masculine boldness, aggression, and overt sexuality. As Swartz-Levine argues with regard to traditional vampire fiction, it “sets up female sexuality as diametrically opposed to femininity and does so in terms of insanity and monstrosity” as well as “draws from a heritage that long reveres the idea of chaste, modest, non-sexual beings as the standard for Englishwomen and deviations from this norm as grotesque” (346). Through the lens of Rice’s contemporary context, however, this internal transformation is not portrayed as threatening, immoral or anxiety inducing.

For Rice, female liberation is not monstrous but awe-inspiring and empowering. Gabrielle appears to be much happier and healthier now in her newly-found freedom of expression, and as Lestat quickly notes, “She laughed more freely and easily than she ever had when she was alive” (Rice 176). The shift in Gabrielle’s affect is not only instantaneous, but thematically significant, as it fits with the novel’s pattern of viewing vampirism as a means of liberation from societal, physical, and sexual constrictions. The view of oneself as now separate from humanity is not a source of grief, but a validation for an individual who has always been an outsider.
Lestat comes to the realization that he can no longer refer to Gabrielle as his mother: “Gabrielle, that was the only name I could ever call her now” (Rice 160). His observation is significant, as it reflects not only his comprehension of Gabrielle’s desire not to adhere to feminine roles, but the reality of their mutual vampirism sets them free from the obligation to comply with social constructs such as familial relations. Their now quasi-incestuous relationship that sees them living as equal partners displaying affection in ways not reserved for parents and children is another expression of this liberation. Rice, thus, challenges Gothic conventions of Otherness by bringing her vampires from the periphery to the center of action, giving them also the opportunity to recount their experiences. Gabrielle’s, and to an extend Lestat’s self-Otherness and conscious choice to distance themselves from social norms that have contributed to their oppression is not, at least for Rice, condemnable but empowering. Gabrielle’s first action upon beginning to roam the city as an undead is to wear the clothes of a young male victim and take on the appearance of a man: “It came clear in an instant why she’d done it. She tore off the pink girdle and skirts right there and put on the boy’s clothes. She’d chosen him for the fit for his clothes” (Rice 171). She discards the young man’s body and focuses on his male garments, having intentionally chosen her first victim for the sole purpose of assuming his male appearance. It becomes apparent that her need to break away from societal restrictions and allow herself to perform her gender identity is more imminent than her need of sustenance.

Having experienced oppression as an individual of a non-conforming gender identity, she feels reborn in her newly-acquired vampiric identity. The main aspect of vampiric condition appears yet again to be not violence or decay but a breakdown of restrictive societal norms, this being a subversively positive depiction of Otherness.
Actually, Lestat observes in the novel: “And to describe it more truly, as she put on his garments she became the boy. [...] she was not really a woman now, was she?” (Rice 171-72). It is clear that Gabrielle’s change in appearance is not merely superficial or a simple rejection of standardized femininity, but shows her unwillingness to continue adhering to an assigned gender that means nothing to her, simply constituting an abandoned social construct.

However, her efforts to change her appearance have not always been successful. Even her attempt to keep her hair short has failed: “Her hair had grown back!” (Rice 180) Lestat says. “It had grown back while she slept until it was as long as it had been before. And it was thicker even more lustrous” (Rice 180). Gabrielle’s reaction to discovering the inability to permanently alter her appearance is characterized by a violent shock:

And she screamed again as if she were on fire. She had fallen back against the window and she was screaming louder as she looked at her hair. She went to touch it and then took her fingers from it as if it were blazing. And she struggled against the window screaming and twisting from side to side, as if she were trying to get away from her own hair. (Rice 180)

Rice’s language of intense supernatural horror is employed to convey the real world claustrophobia of an inescapable oppressive femininity and of being trapped in a ubiquitously patriarchal society. Gabrielle’s long blonde hair had functioned as a representation of her femininity, a traditionally attractive trait that she is quick to part with as soon as she assumes the appearance of a male. Her fearful and disgusted reaction to its growing back denotes her existential horror at not being able to alter the way she is perceived by others even as a member of the undead. Despite being liberated by patriarchal social constructs, she is still perceived as a gendered
individual. The manner that Lestat responds to her terror as a narrator is fraught with confusion and condescension: “It’s grown back, that’s all! It’s natural to you, don’t you see? It’s nothing!” (Rice 181). Legitimizing her fears, Lestat fails to understand the true source of her distress. He considers the event a natural and insignificant aspect of her physicality and refuses to acknowledge the symbolic significance it holds to Gabrielle and its contribution to her physical discomfort. He acts here as an unwitting advocate of the patriarchal gender conventions being blind to Gabrielle’s oppression. Coming to terms with the reality that in order to preserve her desired image she will be forced to cut her hair every night, a narrative detail that alludes to the unceasing fight of the oppressed social groups in the name of acceptance and liberation, she commands Lestat to “burn it. Otherwise it should fill all the rooms of the tower in time, shouldn’t it?” (Rice 182). The discarded hair is thus a rendition of the concept of the domestic abject, an object violently discarded as it is thought to defile one’s life through being a reminder of anxieties humanity desires to expel. The return of the abject, commonly expressed in traditional vampire lore as the resurrection of the body of the vampire itself, here takes the form of the returning symbol of the vilified human repression that threatens to destroy the vampire’s newly-found liberation. Domestic abjection is applied here by Rice as a manifestation not of the anxieties of the dominant society, but of enforced femininity and female oppression.

After Gabrielle’s turning, both literally and figuratively, her relationship with Lestat changes, as he begins to act as a inhibiting factor in her self-liberation. As Gabrielle becomes self-sufficient, her need to employ Lestat as a means through which to indirectly live her desired life decreases. Also, the illusion of him being a constant ally against oppressive conformity is compromised. Despite his sexual non-
conformity, Lestat is a man who has been affected differently than Gabrielle by patriarchal societal norms, the form of his oppression having imbued his liberation with a desire to be accepted and visible. Gabrielle challenges the convention of the vampire as social Other in a different manner; her empowerment is synonymous with willingly turning herself into an alien, expressing in this way her disillusionment with social constructs: “What did I want of her,” Lestat wonders at a moment of frustration at them growing apart, “That she be more human, that she be like me?” (Rice 338). For Lestat, Gabrielle continues being his mother, despite her disdain towards her feminine role. Lestat rejects Gabrielle’s desire to lead a life away from the trappings of contemporary society and dreams of the two of them continuing living together as a mortal pair, with Gabrielle being both a mother and a female lover.

Gabrielle’s vampirism helps her gradually withdraw from social conventions, roles, and duties, preferring instead a life of solitude. As Lestat laments, “Of course it was the countryside that drew her, the forest or the mountains, or islands no human beings lived. […] Why should immortals pore over newspapers, she would ask, or dwell in palaces? Or carry gold in their pockets? Or write letters to a mortal family left behind?” (Rice 332). The vampiric condition here goes beyond sexual liberation so that it responds to all forms of repression and social normativity: “When the world of man collapses in ruin, beauty will take over,” she says to Lestat during a philosophical discussion, “Satanic is merely the name they gave to the behaviour of those who would disrupt the orderly way in which men want to live” (Rice 335). Gabrielle here rejects social order and imposed morality since they are only constructs for her. Her vampirism has become the source of a newly-discovered clarity, an introduction into the contemporary condition of questioning all-encompassing social forms. She is an advocate for extreme moral relativism, rejecting traditional ideals of
good and evil, and refusing to experience remorse for her continuous taking of human life. Gabrielle’s rejection of societal normativity is not, for Rice, the source of evil that it presents itself as in more traditional vampire narratives but a reflection of the contemporary common consciousness as Rice perceives it. It comes as no surprise that her role in the novel ends with her departure. She fulfills her desire to live apart from the trappings of civilization that she now views as restraints, her familial relationship to her son, Lestat, being only another discarded social construction. Vampirism becomes, in the case of Gabrielle, synonymous with a self-imposed sense of Otherness that keeps oneself away from any kind of human fraternity and community.

Overall, Gabrielle’s vampirism leads her initially to liberate herself from the oppressive expectations of her assigned gender. Her rejection of the social construct of gender evolves into a questioning of all the narratives and constructs of her contemporary society and she eventually turns herself willingly into the social Other. With Gabrielle being the embodiment of an empowered and at the same time vampiric female, Rice presents us both with the vampire as a sexual outsider and an accepted Other in her effort to renew and question conventional gothic motifs while offering us a much more enhanced and diversified view of our contemporary reality.

The main theme of *The Vampire Lestat* is the reinvention of the monstrous vampire figure into a dangerous social Other through the utilization of subjective narration, copious use of flashbacks, and the blending of archaic contemporary settings. In the case of Lestat, his vampiric nature comes to represent the liberation from dominant cultural norms of sexuality. He is, in every sense, the Other given a voice in a narrative twist that sees the dominant society itself as the monster of the
tale. In the case of Gabrielle, her vampirism being intertwined with her liberation from female gender norms and patriarchal institutions is only the beginning for a much larger scale rejection of all social constructs. Her break from human nature generates in her feelings of claustrophobia at having to subscribe to any social narrative such as human community and familial bonds. In the 1980s, when non-conforming sexuality is demonized in the real world in a destructive degree, Rice turns her own male and female vampire characters into dominant narrative voices and spokespersons of sexual and gender suppression.
EPILOGUE

The goal of my research has been to approach the first two novels by Anne Rice, those of *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and *The Vampire Lestat* (1985). More specifically, my examination has focused on the gradual centering of the two novels’ main decentered narrative voices in an attempt to shed light on their subjective perception of good and evil as well as their disillusionment about dominating social structures and norms. My research, due to its limited length, does not provide an all-encompassing review of all the themes and motifs of the two examined novels within a broader Gothic theory. It provides, however, a themed context within which Rice’s novels can be examined.

The conclusions drawn from the examinations of *Interview with the Vampire* have been crucial in deciphering the ways in which the novel’s eighteenth century plantation setting and references to Catholicism, in addition to the overall themes of guilt, decay, and family secrets are reinvented. The vampiric figures commented on function only superficially as monstrous Others. The narrative, disregarding traditional views on good and evil, does not focus on the threat that the vampiric outsiders pose on their mortal surroundings since the true devil of the tale is, more often than not, the oppressive and repressive set of values of the dominant culture itself. Feminist issues and the inherent toxicity of patriarchal ideals are examined through the multiple and interweaving threads of the narrative where the characters’ vampiric and non-vampiric actions become intertwined and blurred; both human and monstrous, agents of the patriarchy and victims of it, both the Other and the self, Rice’s vampires are unconventional figures. Their anxieties born out of the loss of faith in protective institutions, are brought to the surface through Rice’s themes of
guilt, death, decay, and the supernatural, carefully constructed here to mirror contemporary concerns. Rice utilizes ornate language, archaic settings, and exaggerated sentimentalism in a self-aware, almost parodying manner to subtly convey the emptiness, lack of connection, and despair her vampire characters experience.

The deductions drawn from the examination of The Vampire Lestat are perhaps of even greater significance, particularly concerning the political implications emerging from the sociocultural context of the novel. As the analysis of the novel’s central themes and characters has indicated, the main literary device that Rice employs here is the radical subversion of the tendency to portray the social outsider as a monstrous and inhuman Other. Inspired by the fights of liberation of the gay community that followed the AIDS epidemic of the 1980’s in the U. S., Rice performs a positive twist on the motif of the vampire as a symbolic sexual outsider. Rice’s symbolic outsiders are not merely granted a narrative voice, but their Otherness is celebrated and idealized in a narrative where only the dominant social ideology is truly vilified. Either striving for equality and recognition, or disillusioned by all social constructs, Rice’s vampires are, through the process of decentralization, the monsters that her own contemporary reality demands.

The most significant findings of my research and the analysis of Rice’s writing pertain to the way in which the subtle infusion of individualized narratives, the fragmentation of the self, the rejection of traditional views on evil, as well as the lack of faith in dominating ideals function as catalysts to the reimagining and reinvention of the notion of monstrous Otherness. The vilification of patriarchal values allow for alternative perceptions to emerge. Rice’s use of historical settings and elaborate language serves as a medium through which one can confront the underlying anxieties
of our contemporary reality. One could argue that the reason for which vampire narratives have continued to thrive is that they force readers to confront their anxieties by constructing a mirror through which the Self can be viewed and examined while evil can be seen both as an institutionalized or internalized force.
Works Cited


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