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From Pathology to Invisibility: The Discourse of Ageing in Vampire Fiction

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Source: *EnterText*, "Special Issue on Ageing and Fiction," 12 (2014): 95-114.

## **Abstract**

A diachronic analysis of the way the literary vampire has been characterised from the Victorian era to the contemporary period underlines a clear evolution which seems especially relevant from the perspective of ageing studies. One of the permanent features characterising the fictional vampire from its origins to its contemporary manifestations in literature is precisely the vampire's disaffection with the effects of ageing despite its actual old age. Nonetheless, even though the vampire no longer ages in appearance, the way it has been presented has significantly evolved from a remarkable aged appearance during the Victorian period through Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to outstanding youth in Anne Rice's *An Interview with the Vampire* (1976), adolescence in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), and even childhood in John Ajvide Lindquist's *Let The Right One In* (2007), thus underlining a significant process of rejuvenation despite the vampire's acknowledged old age. This paper shows how the representations of the vampire in the arts, mainly literature and cinema, reflect a shift from the embodiment of pathology to the invisibility, or the denial, of old age.

## From Pathology to Invisibility: The Discourse of Ageing in Vampire Fiction

Marta Miquel-Baldellou

### **Ageing and vampire fiction**

The figure of the vampire has been inextricably linked to the history of humanity since ancient and classical times as an embodiment of fear, otherness, evil and the abject. Nonetheless, its manifestations in the domain of literature especially began to proliferate during the Victorian period. According to critics such as Teresa Mangum, ageing became of special interest to Victorians, while the literary vampire became the quintessential personification of old age, displaying both its contradictory and oxymoronic traits as well as reflecting some of the stereotypical values often attached to old age.<sup>1</sup> The vampire is ultimately a being, apparently human, that does not look its real age. It is through deceit that the vampire pretends to be young, despite its blatant actual old age, thus defying moral principles and subverting any socially accepted standards as for how a young and an aged person should behave respectively. Likewise, not only does the vampire problematise the social need to categorise people according to age by means of their appearance, but it also subverts the traditionally established dilemma which usually separates mind and body in old age. A legacy of Descartes' philosophy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was his thesis of mind-body dualism, which argued that mind and body are distinct, because the nature of the mind, which is a thinking and non-extended thing, is different from that of the body, which is an extended and non-thinking thing.<sup>2</sup> This argument has given shape to the problem of mind-body casual interaction which is still debated today, and which is of relevance to ageing studies inasmuch as the decline of the body and the wisdom of the mind are concerned. In his treatise on *Old Age*, written in c.65 BC, which, according to Karen Chase, still resounded in Victorian times,<sup>3</sup> Cicero already pointed to this difference between mind and body in relation to youth and old age stating: 'For I admire a young man who has something of the old man in him, so do I

an old one who has something of a young man. The man who aims at this may possibly become old in body – in mind he never will.’<sup>4</sup> Cicero’s reference underlines the need to blend youth and age, as well as the differing effects of ageing on both body and mind. In this respect, the vampire is an embodiment of both youth and age, as it has a young appearance which hides a truly aged being. Likewise, even though its body remains untouched by the effects of ageing, the vampire is often portrayed as haunted by an ever-lasting existence and the memories of an unusually projected existence. The concern about ageing during the Victorian period necessarily finds its reflection in the proliferation of vampire narratives. Thus, it does not appear random that both ageing and vampire fiction began to attract attention in the nineteenth-century; underlining a strongly related link between them. In the Victorian period, interest in old age can be seen reflected in a number of developments such as the central place given to institutions for the care of the elderly, the creation of the elderly subject as a category in medical discourse, and the recognition of a need for public provision in old age. The centrality old age acquired was also coupled with the elusiveness of old age as an experience, and both the power and powerlessness with which old age was often associated, which contributed to defining old age as a complex experience.

Karen Chase has also referred to the Victorian concern with old age stemming from the fact that, due to the improved conditions of life in the nineteenth-century, people were expected to live longer, life expectancy arose significantly higher, and people became more attracted towards the prolongation of life, which at the time sharply contrasted with a notorious high rate of children’s mortality.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, until the twentieth century, living long was considered fairly exceptional, thus allowing old age ‘to be treated as non-normative’, to use Helen Small’s words.<sup>6</sup> It is in this respect that, according to Robert Butler, the social disease of ageism began to take shape, and old age became endowed with moral judgements of mental or moral incapability in addition to declining health.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, the historian David Hackett Fisher even referred to the nineteenth century as a period characterised by the cult of youth and a time where gerontophobia began to settle in.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, Thomas Cole also traces how the American cultural response to ageing shifted from the positive existential meaning of old age, as biblically sanctioned in the Puritan era, to the scientific normalised view of ageing which began to prevail later on, thus exploring the dualistic conception of old age as, on the one hand, venerable due to religious moral, and on the other hand, dependent and infirm due to a presumable lack of moral restraint.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, public imagination had to contend with significantly contradictory images of ageing as a golden period as well as portraits of the aged as a mass of dependent people that began to menace the common welfare of the Victorian nation. In this sense, in vampire fiction, protagonists are often referred to as heroic antagonists or living dead people, thus making use of contradictory terms which underline their oxymoronic nature, implying that they are endowed with a particular centrality while underlining their subversive nature at the same time. In this respect, in vampire narratives there is always a special concern not to trust appearances, as the physique of the vampire is by nature necessarily deceitful and its body matches neither its inward nature nor its actual age.

Similarly, before the nineteenth century, coming to terms with an individual's age was not an easy matter. A person was often considered old only when exhibiting behaviour that betrayed both physical and mental failure, or when the person's physical appearance simply looked old. As a matter of fact, those authorities responsible for deciding when to give aid to the elderly, as was the case with the Poor Law Guardians, did not label anyone according to their chronological age alone. Instead, as Mangum asserts, individuals were assumed to be ageing when they manifested a set of conditions such as behavioural infirmity and physical deterioration.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, Small has also noticed the disparity existing between chronological age and the individual's physical conditions or their consciousness of the process of ageing, which is a basic feature which often characterises the literary vampire, claiming that 'the age we feel is not necessarily the same as our calendrical age, nor is it the same as how we are perceived, or how we register ourselves being perceived by others.'<sup>11</sup>

As a result, medical studies began to focus on specific signs that would aid in categorising somebody as past his or her prime. In his volume *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (1996), Stephen Katz examines the impact of medical studies on the perceptions of old age in the Victorian period and considers how they paved the ground for the establishment of geriatrics and gerontology at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> The body gradually became fixed through the description of a set of biological signs that would ultimately be considered as indicators of health or deterioration.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, medical approaches usually entertained two contradictory perceptions of how old age befell. According to the so-called vitality model, old age was perceived as the gradual oozing away of limited energy and ability, and conversely, another theoretical model argued that old age emerged suddenly as a result of a grand climacteric, which implied physical collapse, loss of sexual identity and mental deviance.<sup>14</sup> This dichotomy between gradual or sudden transformation also features in fictional accounts of the vampire's process of coming into being, which varies from a gradual transition such as in the loss of innocence and initiation into vampirism of formerly angels of the house like Lucy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or Laura in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, to the almost instantaneous transformation of the living to the living dead, following baptism by another vampire such as in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, as Louis is transformed by Lestat, and thus, Louis transforms Claudia into a vampire child. Likewise, men and women were deemed old according to different criteria. Men were often perceived as old in relation to their ability to work, whereas women were considered old according to their reproductive capability rather than their productive potential.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in vampire fiction, male and female vampires come into being into their new existence as a result of different conditions. Male vampires are often transformed so as to help other male vampires and increase their number and their power, whereas female vampires are often transformed when they gain insight into their own sexuality and thus become fallen women. In Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, Lestat, Louis and Claudia travel to Paris where they meet Armand, the leader of a gang of European vampires. Conversely, early poems and short pieces in the vampire tradition already portrayed female vampires as temptresses. As cases in point, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 'Die Freundin von Corinth' ('The Bride of Corinth', 1797), S.T. Coleridge's 'Christabel'

(1797-1800), and Théophile Gautier's 'La Morte Amoureuse' ('The Dead in Love', 1836) are early exponents of women's overt sexuality enthralling young men. Women making advances towards men had necessarily to be depicted as female vampires and thus fallen women trespassing moral boundaries that were banned to pious and virtuous angels of the house in Victorian times.

From a sociological perspective, the focus of attention on ageing in Victorian times seemed to respond to the fact that birth rates began to drop while the population of those who were over forty began to rise significantly. Even though life expectancy did not really increase during the Victorian period, the growing number of aged people began to attract unprecedented attention in the news, the government, the medical profession, and especially literature, thus creating a false impression that England was growing old. In this sense, as Mangum asserts, ageing and the aged can be interpreted as an eminently Victorian media event.<sup>16</sup>

However, this overwhelming feeling that the nation was growing old also contributed to shaping an ongoing discourse of ageism at the time. The elderly were perceived as past the age when society accepted dependency on individuals, and thus the aged began to be held in contempt in a period specially characterised by progress, production, initiative, scientific breakthroughs and imperial expansion. It was a time mostly characterised by change and speed; values that have been traditionally associated with youth as opposed to old age. Moreover, changes in legislation in the 1870s reduced pensions and pressured families to take care of their elders through private initiatives. As Mangum argues, 'changes in the law harshly cut back pensions, coerced families to care for older members, and pressured old people to support themselves.'<sup>17</sup> Likewise, cultural ideas at the time such as Thomas Malthus' theory concerning population growth, Samuel Smiles' volume promoting individuals' self-help or Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories, contributed to an echoing Victorian discourse of the old as eventually sucking the blood of their young relatives, and by extension, of the whole nation, to draw a parallel with the literary vampire figure again.

It is in this cultural and social context that the figure of the vampire began to consolidate through different literary manifestations, culminating in Bram Stoker's seminal novel *Dracula* (1897), which set a lasting precedent for subsequent characterisations of the vampire both in literature and films. As Mangum argues, Victorians became fond of perusing accounts which promised eternal youth and revealed the way to prolong life, often merging medical and philosophical arguments. The proliferation of gothic narratives, and vampire tales in particular, mirrored the exaggerated experimental practices that took place at the time such as injections of crushed animal testicles, which aimed to rejuvenate and improve sexual performance, or the literal transfusion of blood, which bears a close resemblance with the vampire practice portrayed in these narratives. *Dracula* can be seen as the most popular of these narratives, portraying individuals endowed with an ever-lasting life and nourished on the blood of the youth, while echoing medical practices of blood transfusions at the time which promised to prolong youth or restore an ill body back to health. As a case in point, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's tale 'Good Lady Ducayne' (1896), the vampire theme serves the purpose of exploring the results of human vanity, centred on a young companion that grows weaker and weaker from a mysterious mosquito bite, which is eventually explained as a series of blood transfusions designed to extend her old mistress' life beyond natural limits.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the religious and moral discourse in Stoker's novel suggests that the price that must be paid for eternal life is the eventual dissolution of human existence in the natural world, as the insistence on negating death and the wish to prolong earthly life, embodied in the figure of the vampire, threatens to disrupt the order which characterises Victorian society.

### **The portrait of the vampire and its effects on the conceptualisations of ageing**

A diachronic analysis of the way the literary vampire has been characterised from the Victorian era to our contemporary period underlines a clear evolution which seems specially relevant from the perspective of ageing studies. From the first vampire in English fiction, the Byronic aristocrat Lord Ruthven in John Polidori's 'The Vampyre: A Tale' (1819) to the contemporary vampire heartthrobs in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* tetralogy (2005-08), literary and cinematic renderings of the vampire have shifted from focusing on peripheral parasitic personifications of wickedness and

alterity, which mostly threatened the establishment, to the portrayal of heroic antagonists who no longer bear a hideous appearance but rather present a complex personality and a particularly acute sensibility which render them specially appealing to younger generations.

Taking *Dracula* as a pivotal text, as well as considering a wide range of succeeding vampire narratives, evolving textual readings have enhanced and expanded different readings of the vampire myth from different literary theories such as psychoanalysis, gender studies, postcolonialism, postmodernism, neo-Victorianism, cultural studies and popular culture. In the process, the vampire has been envisioned as the incarnation of deviant sexuality, a forerunner of the new woman, the hero of postnational identities, a postmodern existentialist hero and a palimpsest of cultural and social phobias; as well as a profitable cultural commodity for mass consumption. In this respect, William Hughes underlined the evolution of this literary myth outlining the metamorphosis of the vampire from a Victorian displacement phenomenon, inherently negative and repulsive, to an eminently positive enhancement of sensual life which is likely to appear as desirable to contemporary audiences.<sup>19</sup> Given the myriad of interpretations with regard to fictional vampires, attention has often been focused on the vampire's sensuous nature, its threatening presence, its existentialist dilemma in postmodern texts, and recently, its likeable and alluring appearance. Nonetheless, the diverse readings of the literary vampire through time have scarcely taken into consideration the importance that cultural conceptualisations of ageing have exerted on the evolution of the fictional vampire and its characterisation, most likely as a result of the vampire's virtual incapacity to age and its capacity to defy the passage of time and its effects. As opposed to ghosts, which are by definition immaterial beings necessarily, the vampire's physicality acquires a pervasive presence, as its intercourse with others proves essential to ensure its survival. The vampire remains young as long as it drinks away the life and youth of those around it, and behind its youthful appearance, there hides a truly aged individual with the experience and wisdom of a lifetime.

One of the permanent features characterising the fictional vampire from its origins to its contemporary manifestations in literature is precisely the vampire's



disaffection with the effects of ageing. Despite the passage of time, its appearance never betrays its real age, just as the mirror never renders back its actual reflection, thus becoming a clear sign of difference. Nonetheless, its appearance in relation to ageing has evolved consistently from the first literary and cinematic manifestations of the vampire. Even if the vampire no longer ages in appearance, the way it is presented has significantly evolved from a remarkable aged appearance during the Victorian period to outstanding youth, adolescence and even childhood in the most recent manifestations of vampire fiction. It is worth noticing that early portraits of the vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and its cinematic counterpart in Murnau's *Nosferatu* depict the vampire as an eminently old man who is truly even older than he actually looks. Thus, despite his disaffection with the visible effects of ageing, in early and Victorian portraits, the vampire presents a rather aged appearance.

Moreover, vampires were not reflected in mirrors, because vampires were mirrors themselves; double figures which reflected the darker side of Victorian society, its fears and its anxieties. Vampires were thus hideous mirror images in which individuals either failed or were reluctant to recognise themselves, and therefore, were rejected as pathological as a result of a general fear of the Other. In other words, the vampire was the individual's old reflected self. As Leonard Heldreth argues, the vampire's traditional lack of reflection implies an absence of soul, thus underlining a loss of physical reality and presence within a God-orderly world, as well as an insufferable void that can be found at the core of its identity as it disrupts the moral rules of its surrounding ethical reality.<sup>20</sup> Lacking this physical reflection, the vampire embodies a mirror in which people's desires and most frightening fears are reflected back, as the vampire perceives itself as a Jungian shadow, playing the role of the other but also of the older self, thus ultimately becoming a personification of the abject.<sup>21</sup> As a Jungian shadow, the vampire is part of the unconscious mind which amalgamates the individual's repressed instincts. Jung's shadow represents one of the three archetypes, together with the anima and animus, as well as the persona. Accordingly, each individual also wears a mask to make a definite impression upon others and conceal their true nature. Jung calls this mask the persona, which is the social face the individual presents to the world. However, the less the shadow is integrated in the individual's conscious life, the darker this

shadow becomes. Thus, as Victorian individuals deny their repressed instincts, their shadow, the vampire, gains a more significant presence. The vampire mirrors the Victorian individual's repressed self; the old self that needs to be subdued as the discourse of ageism begins to ground.

Conversely, in contemporary manifestations, mirrors do render back the image of vampires, who tend to reflect in mirrors leaving behind gothic clichés, since their appearance is no longer a reflection of the individual, but an inverted image which has been socially constructed and therefore is socially accepted. Stephenie Meyers' tetralogy dismantles some myths in vampire lore in an attempt to update vampire fiction, as Anne Rice had done previously, showing vampires' more human and tormented side. In the *Twilight* saga, vampires do have a reflection in the mirror. In the first novel of this series, *Twilight*, Bella looks at Edward Cullen's reflection from the back seat of a car, stating 'he glared at me in the rearview mirror.'<sup>22</sup> In this sense, following Jung's terminology, the vampire in contemporary fiction often reflects the individual's persona, that is, the individual's social mask, and therefore, his image often reflects back in the mirror. The change from decrepit vampires such as Nosferatu to heartthrobs such as Louis or Edward in Anne Rice's and Stephenie Meyer's vampire novels, underlines an important change from the portrayal of vampires as old to the characterisation of remarkably young characters, even though, in both cases, vampires are always much older than they actually look. However, it is important to notice people's acutely different attitude towards them, as humans flee from individuals such as Nosferatu, whereas they feel romantically attracted to young vampires such as Louis or Edward Cullen. Thus, the attitude towards vampires has been gradually changing through time, as they have acquired more centrality and they have turned significantly younger in appearance. This gradual physical transformation from old to young vampires in appearance was clearly portrayed in an important contribution to the genre in the 1990s. As a case in point, in Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), the vampire is depicted as young and old at different moments. Significantly, when he appears as old, he is often rejected and treated as an outcast by most people that easily identify him as a vampire. By contrast, when he is portrayed as a young individual, his humane side is brought to the fore, as he becomes Mina's lover and is apparently

accepted within the Victorian society of the time. In this sense, Coppola's film contributes an early postmodern paradigm of the vampire who transforms from old age into youth and vice versa, and which clearly shows people's changing attitudes towards him depending on his looks as an old or as a young person. When Dracula's evil side is shown, he is often portrayed as an old man, whereas when he is courting Mina, he is depicted as a young and noble man.

Thus, in former times, the vampire projected its image on the individual, becoming the individuals' reflection of their utmost fears, of their own process of ageing – a pathological alter ego or nemesis. Whereas currently it is the individual who projects his or her own image onto the vampire, thus transforming the vampire into the embodiment of the idealised self – a sought-after alter ego – thus inevitably rendering its ageing invisible in an attempt to deny old age. In contemporary vampire literature, the vampire is often enabled to look at its own body in the mirror because it projects a socially-accepted image of attractiveness; a reflection of the individual's idealised self which still does not seem to contemplate ageing as a particularly alluring stage in life. In this respect, following Margaret Morganroth Gullette's premise that we are ultimately 'aged by culture'<sup>23</sup> and drawing on Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism<sup>24</sup>, the youthful appearance of vampires in contemporary literature responds to the imagined self that we perceive others demand from us in an attempt to modulate our self to suit social or cultural expectations. Drawing on theorists George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, Herbert Blumer coined symbolic interactionism, which states that reality is perceived as social interaction with others. His theory basically involves three premises, which are that humans act towards things on the basis of the meaning they ascribe to those things, the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction one has with others, and finally, these meanings are modified through an interpretative process of the individual with those he or she encounters. Concepts such as negotiated meaning or the social construction of reality emphasise the importance of the roles individuals tend to play in society, which is the result of the individuals' interaction with others. Hence, the way individuals present themselves significantly depends on the way they believe they are perceived by others.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage of infancy explains the process through which the 'I', our subjectivity, is constructed. The infant experiences the recognition of its reflection in a mirror, which is in sharp contrast with its sense of a disunified existence in a fragmented body. Consequently, there arises 'the discrepancy between the visual image and the lived experience', to use Kathleen Woodward's words, which ultimately gives shape to perception.<sup>25</sup> The duality of the image reflected in the mirror inevitably entails difference; thus, the child fantasises about the totality of its fragmented body-image and imagines an idealised image of a more unified self. As regards ageing, Woodward has postulated 'the mirror stage of old age' identifying a point at which the processes of association and disassociation from the effects of old age can affect identity. Following de Beauvoir's premises in her work *The Coming of Age*, Woodward admits that we don't perceive ourselves as old, as it is the stranger within us that is old. Likewise, Woodward also admits with Beauvoir that 'the recognition of our own old age comes to us from the other, that is, from society.'<sup>26</sup> This premise mainly draws upon Lacan's theory of the mirror stage of infancy and Freud's theory of the uncanny, as Woodward underlines the connection between the individual's first and the later stage in life due to both the infant and the ageing person constructing their own subjectivity through their awareness of difference. In this sense, the ageing individual is repulsed by the mirror image he or she beholds, which separates the individual from its inner self. Thus, while the child contrasts a fragmented experience of body with the mirrored whole and fantasises about unity, the old adult compares its image of disintegration with an inner sense of wholeness.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Freud revealed one personal experience of the uncanny when he referred to the shock of recognition at meeting his elderly double in the mirror. According to Woodward, Freud's mirror image of himself as an old person is that of the trespasser, that is, the unconscious having risen into the conscious.<sup>28</sup>

With regard to this sense of disparity between appearance and inner self, Simone de Beauvoir defended the need to identify with the ageing subject in order to avoid the sense of difference with which ageing has often been associated. In this sense, de Beauvoir refers to old age stating that 'for the outsider it is a dialectic relationship between my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself that I acquire by means of him,' finally concluding that 'within me it is the

Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself.<sup>29</sup> As a marker of social difference, ageing is largely socially constructed, thus underlining Margaret Morganroth Gullette's premise that the concept of age-as-loss is part of a powerful cultural construct. Even if in our contemporary Western society, attractiveness has traditionally been associated with youth, identifying ourselves with our aged self ultimately involves a sense of integrity as the aged body becomes a palimpsest of memories, an embodiment of our past. This fulfilment late in life exemplifies what Leslie Fielder calls 'the eros of old age' as we recognise, while we are ageing, that we are gradually becoming what we once desired, thus attaining the reintegration of body and memories, and reaching the last stage of a tripartite pattern consisting of difference, recognition and reconciliation.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, the vampire in contemporary fiction and its frequent reflection in the mirror, as is the case with Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*,<sup>31</sup> seems to underline this reintegration with our own self. However, this reconciliation is at the expense of rendering ageing invisible, as the individual never beholds its aged appearance in the mirror but a rather young, even if artificial self, that endows the individual with a merely simulated sense of reintegration. In this respect, one of the most outstanding changes in the portrayal of vampires from Victorian times to contemporary fiction is that the vampire used to be depicted as an old man, aged in appearance, and even more aged in reality, whereas, in contemporary fiction, the gap between reality, old age, and appearance, extreme youth, seems to be growing wider and wider. Likewise, the significant rejuvenation of the vampire has been coupled with an increasing sympathy towards him, as he is perceived as a tormented and haunted individual that needs to overcome the dilemma between acting according to his good will or the evil nature he knows he represents. In this sense, in Anne Rice's novels, the vampire experienced an existentialist dilemma for the first time.

### **Analyses of examples and evolution of the genre**

In its first literary manifestations, the vampire arose as a clear embodiment of difference and its presence was utterly rejected in Victorian society. In addition to its markedly foreign origins and eccentric habits, its notably aged appearance became another marker of social difference. Since then vampires have undergone a significant process of rejuvenation, displaying a young and alluring image despite

their actual old age that is exalted and even idealised in society. The literary representation of the vampire; an embodiment characterised by old age as well as by a great capacity to defy its effects, has evolved from a clear embodiment of difference, pathology, to an unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation with old age, which eventually lies in rendering the traces of ageing invisible. Even though at first sight, contemporary vampires may exemplify the successful attempt at reconciling inner self and body image, the remarkably young appearance of vampires despite their actual old age underlines the need to erase ageing in order to identify with the vampire and thus sympathise with the aged individual.

John Polidori's text 'The Vampyre: A Tale' (1819)<sup>32</sup> has traditionally been regarded as one of the first portrayals of a vampire in English literature, which laid the fundamentals of the genre subsequently cemented in *Dracula*.<sup>33</sup> In Polidori's tale, Aubrey, a young Englishman, becomes gradually initiated into the world of vice through Lord Ruthven, an eccentric aristocrat. The contrast between Aubrey's youth and Lord Ruthven's age and experience is established from the very first pages of this tale, when they both begin a tour across Europe. In this respect, the following passage underlines the contrast between youth and innocence as opposed to old age and experience, demonstrating that the experience of a lifetime, if used to immoral purposes, easily corrupts the innocence of the youth:

It was time for him [Aubrey] to perform the tour, which for many generations has been thought necessary to enable the young to take some rapid steps in the career of vice towards putting themselves upon an equality with the aged.<sup>34</sup>

This rite of initiation into the corruptibility of ageing as a result of the intimate relationship established between Aubrey and Lord Ruthven is also addressed from a female perspective in Joseph Sheridan le Fanu's novel of female vampires *Carmilla* (1872), as an ageing female vampire also initiates young Laura into sexuality. Carmilla is middle-aged, but gradually seems to undergo a process of premature ageing, as her health progressively declines and becomes weaker each day:

Her face underwent a change that alarmed and even terrified me for a moment. It darkened, and became horribly livid; her teeth and hands were clenched, and she frowned and compressed her lips, while she stared down upon the ground at her feet, and trembled all over with a continued shudder as irrepressible as ague.<sup>35</sup>

These two vampire narratives underline one of the most enduring themes within vampire fiction, which is deviant sexuality. Sexual intercourse in old age has traditionally been perceived as taboo. According to Herbert Covey, the perception of inappropriateness of sex in old age has often been justified through physical limitations, and especially, through moral dictates, as sex in old age would not necessarily lead to procreation.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, aged women that made advances in that respect were perceived as evil and were in danger of being harshly penalised from a male and moral perspective.<sup>37</sup> The sexual discourse within vampire fiction thus also relates to sexuality understood from the perspective of ageing, as the vampire, representing old age, performs an alternative sexual intercourse, which is necessarily perceived as deviant from a social perspective, as it does not lead to procreation and eludes the Victorian moral discourse. The male vampire's use of his phallic fangs can be interpreted as a sign of male impotence in old age. The portrayal of impotence in old age takes for granted a sense of powerlessness and sexual decline with which society tends to associate with the elderly. Similarly, the advances of some female vampires seem to correspond to a last resort to retain fertility and reject menopause, engaging in an alternative and more voluntary menstruation that would allow them to remain young for time to come. Female vampires also tend to adopt a more active role in sexuality than was publically acceptable in Victorian women, especially in their old age. Likewise, female vampires' intercourse could be read as necessarily too androgynous, as a wish to usurp the role of the male, or otherwise, as a will to embody the Freudian *vagina dentata* as a sign of deviant sexuality on the part of aged women, which appears particularly threatening to men. Thus, in addition to an apparent demonisation of sexuality in general, vampire fiction particularly addresses the taboo of sex in old age. Vampires, even if virtually young, are truly embodiments of old age, make

advances towards young men and women to ooze the life of the young, and thus perform a socially perceived deviant sexual intercourse with both males and females.

Lord Ruthven and Carmilla set an early and important precedent for subsequent portrayals of both the male and female vampire as sexual initiators. Even though Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was not an early portrayal of the vampire myth, it has been acknowledged as the novel that consolidated the genre as it gave shape to a series of well-known characteristics that have often been attached to the figure of the vampire as an old aristocratic man coming from a foreign country with an old regime and coming to settle down in Victorian England. Throughout Bram Stoker's novel, despite the fact that the vampire's appearance never reflects its actual age, its wrinkled and withered appearance is often highlighted as the plot unfolds. From the perspective of ageing, *Dracula* arises as the representative paradigm of the late-Victorian vampire; as a physical metaphor of a tripartite alterity, being foreign, aristocratic and explicitly characterised as old. As a case in point, this is the description following Jonathan Harker's arrival at the Count's castle:

Within, stood a tall old man, clean-shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad, in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere. He held in his hand an antique silver lamp, in which the flame burned without chimney or globe of any kind, throwing long, quivering shadows as it flickered in the draught of the open door. The old man motioned me in with his right hand with a courtly gesture.<sup>38</sup>

These aged Victorian vampires seem to be in sharp contrast with the blatantly young archetypes of the vampire that eventually populated twentieth-century vampire fiction. In this respect, as an outstanding turning point, Rice's series following her novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1973) contributed to a major metamorphosis of the vampire as its aged countenance transformed into outstanding youth. Much younger than Lord Ruthven, *Dracula*, Carmilla or Nosferatu, Louis and Lestat in Rice's novel have the looks of a person in their mid-twenties. Early on in the novel, Louis admits 'I was a twenty-five-year-old man when I became a vampire, and the year was seventeen ninety-one'.<sup>39</sup> Not only should Anne Rice be given the credit for portraying



young vampires as leading characters of her novels, but also for introducing the figure of the vampire child, personified through Claudia. It is significant to notice that, as vampires' appearance becomes gradually younger, readers are also allowed to gain a deeper insight into the vampire's motivations, thus rendering them more humane and prone to sympathy, as a faked attempt at reintegrating their inner self with their reflection in the mirror, that is to say, their persona and their shadow, to use Jung's terms.

According to William Hugues, this gradual transformation responds to the fact the vampire must be interpreted as the embodiment of both authorial and social neuroses as well as the coded expression of more general cultural fears of which the author is an observer of his or her own times. In this respect, the evolving characterisation of the vampire in literature demonstrates the personification of different conceptualisations of ageing throughout time. In this respect, a clearly sharp contrast can be established between Stoker's characterisation of the vampire and the adolescent vampires populating Rice's novels even though they all can be characterised through their disaffection with ageing. As Martin Wood notes, Rice's vampire novels have forced readers to confront the core truths of the myth itself, finding themselves feeling an uneasy sympathy with monsters and, therefore, her works force a revision of our understanding of vampire mythology.<sup>40</sup> One of Rice's most blatant innovations is that, despite their actual old age, vampires look like adolescents and they are also presented as more corporeal. In this sense, in the first book of her series, *Interview with the Vampire*, Louis discovers that he has a reflection in a mirror, as also do all the other vampires he gets acquainted with. In Rice's novels, vampires begin to adopt an idealised image for the first time. In a way, vampires in contemporary fiction tend to subvert Woodward's theory of the mirror of old age, as their unified self does not meet a disintegrated or pathological image in the mirror – something so hideous that mirrors cannot even reflect as was the case with Victorian narratives of vampires – but they rather meet a faked unified reflection, a virtual image of youth that necessarily defies reality. This idealisation allows the vampires' reflection in the mirror, as it becomes a socially acceptable image to hide or avoid the effects of ageing in contemporary society. In turn, this underlines the social concern to hide the effects of ageing through the use of make-up or plastic

surgery, and thus, render the traces of ageing invisible, just as the vampire also becomes more and more disaffected with the passage of time.

Moreover, as the vampire acquires further importance as the actual protagonist of the novel and thus raises the sympathy and understanding of the readership, it becomes customary that the vampire also presents a much younger appearance in clear contrast with previous portraits of vampires, whose appearance was remarkably older even if it never reflected their actual age. In this respect, following the tendency initiated by Rice's fiction, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* tetralogy features a male teenager vampire, Edward Cullen, who confesses he 'was seventeen and dying of the Spanish influenza the vampire'<sup>41</sup> when his father Carlisle transformed him into a vampire, in the summer of 1918, although the action of the novel is set in the year 2005. Again, the vampire can defy the effects of ageing but necessarily acquires a remarkably young appearance if he is to be sympathetic to the reader. Therefore, ageing is ultimately rendered invisible.

In addition to featuring outstandingly young vampires in their adolescence, following the trace of Rice's revenants, contemporary vampire fiction often portrays vampires as children, taking Rice's Claudia as a clear prototype. If the portraits of adolescent vampires seem to defy Woodward's theory of the mirror of old age, the vampire child also seems to call into question Lacan's theory of the infant's fragmented self that fantasises about the integrated image it sees in the mirror. In the case of vampire narratives featuring vampire children, the vampire child perceives the sharp contrast established between its unified self and the fragmented image in the mirror, as its appearance is notably infantilised while its inner self is remarkably old. Obviously, this childish appearance despite their blatant senescence also brings literally to mind the metaphor of ageing as a second childhood and as an attempt at pursuing the fantasy of ageing as a golden age.

As cases in point, Laurell K. Hamilton's *Guilty Pleasures* (1993), which gave rise to her series of novels featuring Anita Blake as a vampire hunter, portrays a

female child as the master of the vampires that populate the city, describing her in the following terms:

She had been about twelve or thirteen when she died. Small, half-formed breasts showed under a long flimsy dress. It was pale blue and looked warm against the total whiteness of her skin. She had been pale when alive; as a vampire she was ghostly. Her hair was that shining white-blond that some children have before their hair darkens to brown. This hair would never grow dark.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist's successful novel *Let the Right One In* (2004) narrates the story of Oskar, a twelve-year-old child, bullied at school, who meets the twelve-year-old looking Eli, who, in turn, happens to be a two-hundred-old vampire forever frozen in late childhood.<sup>43</sup> The proliferation of vampire children in contemporary vampire fiction underlines a significant diachronic evolution from portraits of aged vampires in Victorian fiction to adolescent and infant vampires in contemporary narratives as the figure of the vampire becomes more sympathetic and appealing to younger audiences. The image of the vampire as an embodiment of the aged has moved from a sign of difference and pathology to blatant invisibility as the effects of ageing are vanished from the picture, thus underlining a faked integration with the image of the old in the mirror. The vampire child easily befriends human children that seem to be their age but they are absolutely unaware of the age span separating them and that is precisely what joins them together. As ageing remains invisible, it no longer becomes a sign of difference, and from this follows that age only seem acceptable as long as it remains hidden.

## **Conclusions**

Following this chronological transformation of the portrayal of the literary vampire as an embodiment of the aged individual, it can be argued there exists a general tendency moving from portraits of pathology to depictions of invisibility in relation to old age. In Victorian times, the vampire's aged appearance arose as a sign of difference and its image was not reflected in mirrors because it truly became an embodied mirror reflecting people's age. Following Lacan, the vampire thus became a sign of disintegration as people failed to recognise the vampire as the disintegrated

reflection of their own self; the void between body and inner self. Their reflection is non-existent as a sign of pathology and difference. Subsequently, as the vampire grew younger, it also acquired more centrality as the real hero, apparently becoming the embodiment of the integrated image between the body and the mind. Its image is often reflected in mirrors in many contemporary manifestations as the vampire becomes socially-accepted and its presence becomes endemic in society. Nonetheless, this integration renders age invisible, as the vampire's image is deceitful, and therefore, does not reflect its actual age, as the process of ageing is often hidden or counteracted through make-up and surgery. Consequently, the contemporary literary vampire does not truly illustrate an integrated image through which the subject is enabled to identify himself as he merely responds to global and social utopias of eternal youth rather than portraying actual age as a desirable stage in life in which the individual attains self-fulfilment.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Teresa Mangum, 'Growing Old: Age,' Herbert F. Tucker, ed., *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 97-109.

<sup>2</sup> Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-1991).

<sup>3</sup> Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cicero, *Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero with His Treatises on Friendship and Old Age; Letters of Pliny the Younger. The Five Foot Shelf of Classics*, Vol. IX (New York: Cosimo, 2009), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Robert N. Butler, 'Ageism,' *The Encyclopedia of Aging* (New York: Springer, 1987), 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America: The Bland-Lee Lectures Delivered at Clark University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Mangum, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Small, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 144.

<sup>19</sup> William Hughes, 'Fictional Vampires in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,' David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 143-153.

<sup>20</sup> Leonard G. Heldreth, 'S.P. Somtow's Timmy Valentine: The Vampire as Archetype and Fragmented Reflection,' Leonard G. Heldreth and Mary Pharr, eds., *The Blood is the Life: Vampires in Literature* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 121-137.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

- <sup>22</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: MT Books, 2008), 385.
- <sup>23</sup> Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of Midlife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).
- <sup>24</sup> Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969).
- <sup>25</sup> Kathleen Woodward, 'The Mirror Stage of Old Age,' Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz, eds., *Memory and Desire: Aging, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 97-113.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.
- <sup>27</sup> Kay Heath, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: Victorian Age Construction and the Specular Self,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34.1(2006): 27-45.
- <sup>28</sup> Kathleen Woodward, 'The Mirror Stage of Old Age,' Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz, eds., *Memory and Desire: Aging, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 106.
- <sup>29</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1973), 420.
- <sup>30</sup> Leslie A. Fielder, 'More Images of Eros and Old Age: The Damnation of Faust and the Fountain of Youth,' Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz, eds., *Memory and Desire: Aging, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 37-50.
- <sup>31</sup> Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Vampires, Werewolves and Other Monsters* (New York: Visionary Living, 2005), 162.
- <sup>32</sup> John Polidori, 'The Vampyre: A Tale,' David Stuart Davies, ed. *Children of the Night: Classic Vampire Stories* (London: Wordsworth, 2007) 7-24.
- <sup>33</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Wordsworth, 2000).
- <sup>34</sup> Polidori, 9.
- <sup>35</sup> Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, 'Carmilla', David Stuart Davies, ed. *Children of the Night: Classic Vampire Stories* (London: Wordsworth, 2007) 85.
- <sup>36</sup> Herbert C. Covey, *Older People in Western Art and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 169.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.
- <sup>38</sup> Stoker, 15.
- <sup>39</sup> Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (London: Sphere, 2001), 7.
- <sup>40</sup> Martin J. Wood, 'New Life for an Old Tradition: Anne Rice and Vampire Literature,' Leonard G. Heldreth and Mary Pharr, eds., *The Blood is the Life: Vampires in Literature* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 59.
- <sup>41</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: MT Books, 2008), 287.
- <sup>42</sup> Laurell K. Hamilton, *Guilty Pleasures* (London: Headline, 1993), 71.
- <sup>43</sup> John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let The Right One In* (London: Quercus, 2007).