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The Genealogy of Dracula: An Evolutionary Literary Analysis of The Vampire as a Meme

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Abstract. British author of Irish origin, Bram Stoker's gothic horror novel, *Dracula* is the most reputed and popular example of the vampire literature that first emerged in seventeenth-century poetry. The first of the two key concepts that this thesis analyzes is the concept of "meme", which was coined by the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, that can be defined as a thought, symbol or application transmitted from one individual to another via oral, written and visual methods and means of communication within a culture, replicates itself, transforms, responds to selective pressures, and the second concept is the memetic evolution of the vampire into the character, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker in Romantic ballads and Victorian horror narratives within the context of Evolutionary Literary Criticism which was theorized by Professor Joseph Carroll. In this regard, the qualities of the vampire phenotype that the *Dracula* meme inherited some qualities from its antecedent works of vampire fiction through memetic heredity, setting and plot are examined, and the evolutionary process that literary vampire predecessor had undergone towards the Transylvanian, aristocratic, seductive, stereotypical vampire. Finally, in the appendix, the prequels, sequels, and spin-offs of *Dracula* to demonstrate that the *Dracula* meme has survived and thrived notwithstanding over a century after its first publication and the selective pressures, and subsist by copying itself.

Keywords. Stoker, *Dracula*, Vampire, Evolution, Meme

The classical definition of a vampire is that it is a reanimated human corpse that feeds on other humans by drinking their blood. Vampires

The aim of this article is to provide an in-depth analysis of the evolution of vampires in literature as a *meme* from the perspective of Evolutionary Literary Criticism, focusing on Bram Stoker's seminal Gothic horror novel *Dracula*. Vampire Craze of the 1720s transferred the Balkan superstitions of blood-drinking undead creatures to literature. In addition, *Dracula* was not the first vampire story in the English language. It had some well-known predecessors such as *Vampyre*, *Varney the Vampire*, and *Carmilla*. A detailed list of the Antecedent vampire texts in English literature is presented in Appendix A.

This article does not aim to discuss the originality of *Dracula*. Though it consists of many naturally selected vampire memes, Stoker's vampire novel is an original meme all by itself. It inherits memetic material from the earlier vampire works of fiction, just like a baby inherits genetic material from its parents. This fact does not cause anyone to question the originality of the baby. It is the same for memes and *Dracula*.

Moreover, *Dracula* is one of the most influential vampire narratives in literature. There are a total of 2691 book entries in Goodreads, a website for readers, and book recommendations on *Dracula*; however, for those three preceding vampire texts, the total number of entries is just 270. Similarly, a search on the IMDB website (International Movie Database) gives the result of 347 movie titles for *Dracula*; however, the combined number of the other three earlier vampires is merely 10. It can be understood from these figures that *Dracula* is more successful and inspirational than *Varney the Vampire*, *Vampyre*, and *Carmilla*. So, this article seeks answers to these questions; What makes *Dracula* more influential than the other vampire narratives? Why was *Dracula* more successful than the other vampire works of fiction? How was Vampire Literature affected by *Dracula*?

It might be claimed that Bram Stoker was infected by a meme, a “virus of the mind” (Dawkins, 1993) called vampire and *Dracula* is the result of this infection. Vampire memes that have passed from folklore to literature and from earlier literary work on vampires to Stoker and replicated themselves, evolved to adapt the selective forces of the cultural environment, and mutated absorbing new memetic material from Stoker himself, creating a new hybrid strain of literary vampire. So this article claims that *Dracula* is a successful and influential vampire narrative because it is the result of some fit for survival memes infected Stoker’s mind like viruses and *Dracula*’s success and its influence as well as the characters and events depicted in the novel can be explained in evolutionary terms. For this purpose, the basic concepts of evolutionary theory, the notion of Literary Darwinism, and the term *meme* were examined as the theoretical background of the article. The article examines the evolution of literary vampires as a meme. While focusing on a close analysis of the origin of the blood-drinking revenant, the traits of literary vampires, and the evolution of vampire fiction extending as far as *Dracula*, the study also takes a glance at vampire meme in the contemporary literature as a fit for survival meme.

Then, the emergence of the concept of vampire and the early influential vampire narratives in British literature were explored. Moreover, the evolution of the vampire meme throughout Romantic and Victorian literary works up to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* are analysed in order to identify the evolutionary changes that the vampire meme had gone through in the course of time to evolve into *Dracula*. To achieve this goal, in addition to the romantic ballads and Victorian vampire fictions, Bram Stoker’s working notes for *Dracula* were investigated, as well.

The vampire is a meme in terms of evolutionary literary theory, which originates from the preternatural beings commonly consume blood as sustenance in ancient myths, and folkloric revenants in various cultures around the world. As James Frazer explains in the third edition of *The Golden Bough*, cultures pass over three evolutionary stages in time; magic, religion, and science (1890, p. 237). This is true for vampires, as well. Vampires first became a figure of English literature in the Romantic ballads following the vampire epidemics in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Europe which were sparked by the publication of official documents, news reports, and treatises, and then it had evolved into a literary figure of prose fiction in Victorian literature, among which Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is the definitive one by virtue of the vampiric tropes and the phenotypic traits that were inherited from its antecedents. As a result of the aforementioned memetic heritage, the Victorian vampire meme embodied in the form of *Dracula* survived the natural selection process, which Darwin defines as “descent with modification” (1859, p. 344) transcended the boundaries of Victorian-era and Europe,

invading new cultural habitats and forcing inferior undead species into extinction. As a result, Dracula has survived and thrived for over a century, proving its evolutionary fitness.

In the Victorian era, vampire fictions such as John William Polidori's *Vampyre*, James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest's *Varney the Vampire*, Sheridan le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* were all very popular. Although the notion of revenants and imaginary creatures that feed on human blood are ancient and universal, southeast Europe is the point of origin for the great vampire epidemics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which sparked the Romantic and Victorian literary interest on the undead. Montague Summers states on vampires that they are the most terrible, dreaded, and abhorred undead beings, but they are also fascinating. (1928, p. 2). The origins of the literary vampires date back to prehistoric times. Revenants can be found in Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, India, Africa, Scandinavia, Greece, and Rome. As Summers puts it:

The origins of a belief in vampirism, although, of course, very shadowy, unformed and unrelated, may probably be said to go back to the earliest times when primitive man observed the mysterious relations between soul and body. The division of an individual into these two parts must have been suggested to man by his observation, however crude and rough, of the phenomenon of unconsciousness, as exhibited in sleep and more particularly in death. (1928, p. 9)

These early mythological and folkloric vampires oozed into literature via news reports of the events in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The report written by the military surgeons of the Habsburg army is shared with the public in 1732. The publication of news based on the vampire activity on this report called *Visum et Repertum* created a surge of interest in Germany, France, and Britain. These stories flourished in the writings of many famous authors. Men of letters as famous as Bürger, Goethe, Coleridge, and Byron created literary works concerning vampires. This was the true birth of the vampire meme in literature.

By becoming a literary meme which originates from the preternatural beings commonly consume blood as sustenance in ancient myths, and folkloric revenants throughout various cultures around the world and evolving into a literary figure in the form of Romantic ballads following the vampire "epidemics" in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe vampires had flourished as the subject matter of Victorian prose fiction, among which Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was the definitive one thanks to the vampiric tropes and the phenotypic traits that were inherited from the antecedent vampire fiction such as *Varney the Vampire*, *Carmilla*, and *The Vampyre*.

As the ultimate evolutionary stage of the literary vampire in Victorian English literature, *Dracula*'s transformation from an about to become extinct Eastern European monster to a relentless predator that feeds on human beings in various parts of England, solely preying on women such as Wilhelmina Murray and Lucy Westenra is solid proof that Stoker's vampire count is a highly adaptable creature and a good example of the evolutionary principle of *the survival of the fittest*. *Dracula* achieves his aim of settling into a new habitat unnoticed in order to continue his existence. So, it can be claimed that the Victorian vampire meme embodied in the form of *Dracula* had survived both the natural and cultural selection processes as a meme and being, transcended the boundaries of Victorian-era and Europe, invading new cultural habitats and forcing inferior undead species into extinction. To this day, *Dracula* adaptations in various media have outnumbered the adaptations of the earlier vampires such as *Varney*, *Carmilla*, and *Ruthven*. Since memes are units of culture transmitted from person to

person and replicating, multiplying, adapting, mutating in the process of evolution just like a living organism, the memes of the literary vampire figures are endangered species, whereas genus *Dracula* shows steady growth.

This study comprises four chapters. The first chapter, *Introduction*, provides the subject, aim, importance, and background of the story. The introductory chapter Proto-vampire entities in myths and folktales around the globe, as well as early vampire narratives in European literature, are also going to be mentioned in this chapter. *Chapter II*, Theoretical Background, addresses Darwinian literary criticism first theorized by Professor Joseph Carroll, the term *meme* coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and the characters and plot of *Dracula* in accordance with the Theory of Evolution. *Chapter III*, An Evolutionary Literary Analysis of The Vampire as A Meme in *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, analyses Bram Stoker's epistolary horror novel, *Dracula*, within the context of vampire, as a meme; hereditary informational units passed through generations of culture. In *Chapter IV*, Conclusion, *Dracula* as the vampire meme that has inspired numerous literary work and other cultural entities. *Dracula* has survived and thrived for over a century, proving its fitness.

This article aims to analyse Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in the context of Evolutionary Literary Theory. *Dracula* is chosen as the subject literary work of this article since it is a highly adaptable and influential work of the vampire fiction genre.

As it is stated in *Chapter II*, Evolutionary Literary Theory approaches literature in the context of evolution, interpreting literary texts as a product of the evolved human imagination. Evolutionary Literary Theory integrates literary concepts with an evolutionary understanding of the evolved and adapted characteristics of human nature. Some basic biological needs like survival and reproduction are used to describe the behaviour of the characters in a work of literature. In this article, the actions of *Dracula* are interpreted in accordance with the Evolutionary Literary Theory.

The descent of the *Dracula* meme by modification as the superior vampire was not instantaneous. It inherited many traits and qualities from the antecedent literary vampire figures that are near extinct and almost forgotten such as Lord Ruthven, Carmilla, and Sir Francis Varney. Moreover, the *Dracula* meme can still compete well with modern rivals like Anne Rice's Rock star vampire Lestat, Stephenie Meyer's shiny, vegetarian vampire family of the Cullens and Charlaine Harris' artificial blood-drinking and civic-rights-seeking vampires from the American south.

The phylomemetic tree of the undead monster universally known as the vampire is rooted in the gods, goddesses, demigods, and demons of ancient myths as Melton and states, and folkloric revenants and ghosts, as Summers claims. One of these folkloric vampires turned into a successful meme due to the implicit scientific confirmation in the shape of a military medical report. The news coverage on newspapers and magazines had fired the imagination of the Romantic poets like Coleridge and Byron. The vampires depicted in those poetic vampire fictions were not so different from the aboriginal vampires seen on folk beliefs, yet they managed to transfer the vampire meme to Victorian prose vampire narratives. These Gothic stories of castles, aristocratic or wealthy families, and noble, blood-thirsty vampires were the true progenitors of Count *Dracula*. The inherited memetic material from those ancestral literary works had been selected and transferred to *Dracula*. When thought in evolutionary terms, the motivations of *Dracula*'s actions are consistent with the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection, and *Dracula* had inherited vampiric tropes and plot lines from the preceding works of Polidori, Le Fanu, Rymer and Prest, and some other writers. So,

Dracula is the progeny of the qualities that it inherited from the preceding vampire texts. In this article, all these earlier vampires and the traits they possess are accepted as independent memes.

Today, Stoker's undead creature is still the determinative vampire figure in its epistolary novel, theatrical play, big-screen motion picture, television series, film adaptation, graphic novel, video game forms, and countless other cultural references that are related to the idea of the vampire. All of the points which are discussed about the superiority of Stoker's vampire count over its contemporaries show that what makes Dracula more successful is not only its memetic material inherited from the vampire lore and literature.

In this article, Bram Stoker's epistolary vampire novel is analysed from an evolutionary perspective. The rationale behind the selection of Dracula as the subject material is that Dracula is a hybrid of the preceding vampire fiction in English literature, and it proved to be a successful vampire strain in evolutionary terms. Dracula is regarded as a meme to put it in an evolutionary context. As an evolutionary term, a meme is an idea, image, symbol, or practice that is transmitted from person to person in a culture. Memes are cultural analogues to genes. A gene is the basic physical and functional unit of heredity of living organisms.

Similarly, a meme is the fundamental mental unit of heredity of cultural ideas. A meme can be transferred through speech or writing. So, literary works can act as a transmitter of memes.

The idea of a corpse returning to life to feed on the blood of the living came to existence first in mythologies and folklore of many different cultures around the world. Those early vampire memes transferred mostly orally within a society, and independent vampire memes existed in various cultures. Writing and literature gave memes a better means of spread.

Thanks to literature a meme could reach many people at once rather than one person at a time. Memes travelled long distances in written form, and they were permanently fixed on rock, clay, papyrus, parchment, or paper. The enlightenment, the industrial revolution, literary translations, international journalism, and new communication technologies had allowed memes to become a global contagion. In eighteenth-century Europe, the literacy rate increased, printing press allowed rapid production of written texts, Eastern European folk beliefs were translated to German, French, and English as horror stories spreading the local vampire memes of the Balkans in Western Europe, and thanks to telegraph news of the strange occurrences like vampire activity were able to be published in the West. The result of all of the advances mentioned above was the so-called "Vampire Craze" of the 1720s (Welkins, 2011). It was the first mass hysteria or burst of interest for vampires. Members of clergy and scientist wrote treatises and medical reports on these "real" vampires infesting villages on the far corners of Europe. Vampire sightings were reported on journals, gazettes, and newspapers in Poland, Russia, France, and Britain.

The transformation of the vampire meme had gone through in the west was the result of the selective forces of evolution on it. In order to survive in the new cultural habitat and in an age of science and enlightenment, medieval superstitions that arose to offer an explanation to deaths caused by communicative diseases and the stages a dead body goes through the natural process of decomposition, the illiterate, poor and neglected people of Transylvania and Wallachia hosted the meme of the undead revenant. However, the vampire meme had evolved into a sanguivorous monster with supernatural

powers. This new strain of vampire meme sought refuge on the grey area of the scientific understanding bordering the occult in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dracula is the final stage of the descent of the vampire meme through modification. Bram Stoker combined the folkloric resources about vampires that he acquired from sources like Sabine Baring-Gould and Emily Gerard. As it is discussed in Chapter III, Stoker also made use of the antecedent Romantic poems that include vampiric themes and characters, and Victorian vampire narratives such as *The Mysterious Stranger*, *The Vampire*, *Varney the Vampire*, and *Carmilla*. In addition to all of the things above, Dracula also reflects the fears and anxieties of the Victorians, diminishing them from God's perfect creation to the status of a feral beast in origin. The insight that Darwin's evolutionary theory about the origin of the modern humans lying on the ancestral hominin was as panic-infusing for the Victorians as a blood-thirsty monster lurking on the streets of England and the bedroom of the English ladies.

Dracula is the fittest vampire meme in Victorian English Literature due to many reasons. It was not hard for the Victorians to imagine such horror because the horrible murders that Jack the Ripper committed on the back alleys of Whitechapel was a fresh memory. It helped the vampire meme took a firm hold of the British. The verisimilitude of the details such as legal rules about acquiring estates in Britain and means of transport and the epistolary form of the novel were other shocking aspects of the Dracula that adds to its memetic success.

Memes are ideas that spread from person to person within a culture. Memes of vampires such as Sir Francis Varney, Carmilla, and Lord Ruthven, and memes of vampiric tropes like fangs, leaving puncture wounds on the victim's neck, and controlling wild beasts are subject to evolutionary selection. In this sense, Dracula is a survivor; it is the definitive vampire *meme* that evades the selective forces of nature through mutations and adaptations. The Dracula meme has kept evolving after its publication throughout more than a century, and it has prevailed and prospered.

What makes Dracula more influential than competing vampire narratives or memes is that Stoker's Transylvanian count has an eerie ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions, its unholy appeal and charisma. As a result, Dracula still continues its memetic lineage. In the twenty-first century, Dracula is still a popular novel and it is widely known by the general public. The Dracula meme subsists in the modern world through the 2013 American NBC television series starring Jonathan Rhys Meyers, 2014 film *Dracula Untold* starring Luke Evans, 2017 Netflix animation series titled *Castlevania*, the prequel novel to *Dracula* by Dacre Stoker, Bram Stoker's great-grandnephew, titled *Dracul*, and the 2020 television series from the famous producers of *Sherlock*, Mark Gatiss, and Steven Moffat. The selected contemporary Dracula adaptations listed above and many more in Appendix B prove Dracula's never-ending but ever-evolving effect on vampire literature. It is common knowledge that Transylvania is home to vampires, thanks to Dracula. Biting victims' necks, pointy canines that look longer than they supposed to be, controlling beasts, therianthropy in the form of turning into a bat or dog, avoiding the flower of garlic, transforming to misty or dust are all trademark vampire qualities that are set by Stoker as memes. So, Dracula affected vampire literature and the vampire meme intensely since its epigones share the same memetic traits as Dracula. To conclude, this article proves that the vampire meme that infested Stoker was a thriving strain of memetic virus that had been selected for centuries, it replicated itself in his mind, mutating, adapting and evolving thus becoming the apex predator of the Victorian vampire coven, and it survived for

more than a century as a vampire meme and endured the competition of rival vampire memes.

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