

3 - Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A PREPOSITION MAKES! If you take the “with” out of “Nice to eat with you,” it begins to mean something quite different. Less wholesome. More creepy. It just goes to show that not all eating that happens in literature is friendly. Not only that, it doesn’t even always look like eating. Beyond here there be monsters.

Vampires in literature, you say. Big deal. I’ve read Dracula. And Anne Rice.

Good for you. Everyone deserves a good scare. But actual vampires are only the beginning; not only that, they’re not even necessarily the most alarming type. After all, you can at least recognize them. Let’s start with Dracula himself, and we’ll eventually see why this is true. You know how in all those Dracula movies, or almost all, the count always has this weird attractiveness to him? Sometimes he’s downright sexy. Always, he’s alluring, dangerous, mysterious, and he tends to focus on beautiful, unmarried (which in the social vision of nineteenth-century England meant virginal) women. And when he gets them, he grows younger, more alive (if we can say this of the undead), more virile even. Meanwhile, his victims become like him and begin to seek out their own victims. Van Helsing, the count’s ultimate nemesis, and his lot, then, are really protecting young people, and especially young women, from this menace when they hunt him down. Most of this, in one form or another, can be found in Bram Stoker’s novel (1897), although it gets more hysterical in the movie versions. Now let’s think about this for a moment. A nasty old man, attractive but evil, violates young women, leaves his mark on them, steals their innocence – and coincidentally their “usefulness” (if you think “marriageability,” you’ll be about right) to young men – and leaves them helpless followers in his sin. I think we’d be reasonable to conclude that the whole Count Dracula saga has an agenda to it beyond merely scaring us out of our wits, although scaring readers out of their wits is a noble enterprise and one that Stoker’s novel accomplishes very nicely. In fact, we might conclude it has something to do with sex.

Well, of course it has to do with sex. Evil has had to do with sex since the serpent seduced Eve. What was the upshot there? Body shame and unwholesome lust, seduction, temptation, danger, among other ills.

So vampirism isn’t about vampires?

Oh, it is. It is. But it’s also about things other than literal vampirism: selfishness, exploitation, a refusal to respect the autonomy of other people, just for starters. We’ll return to this list a bit later on.

This principle also applies to other scary favorites, such as ghosts and doppelgängers (ghost doubles or evil twins). We can take it almost as an act of faith that ghosts are about something besides themselves. That may not be true in naive ghost stories, but most literary ghosts – the kind that occur in stories of lasting interest – have to do with things beyond themselves. Think of the ghost of Hamlet’s father when he takes to appearing on the castle ramparts at midnight. He’s not there simply to haunt his son; he’s there to point out something drastically wrong in Denmark’s royal household. Or consider Marley’s ghost in A Christmas Carol (1843), who is really a walking, clanking, moaning lesson in ethics for Scrooge. In fact, Dickens’s ghosts are always up to something besides scaring the audience. Or take Dr. Jekyll’s other half. The hideous Edward Hyde exists to demonstrate to readers that even a respectable man has a dark side; like many Victorians, Robert Louis Stevenson believed in the dual nature of humans, and in more than one work he finds ways of showing that duality quite literally. In The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) he has Dr. J. drink a potion and become his evil

half, while in his now largely ignored short novel *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), he uses twins locked in fatal conflict to convey the same sense. You'll notice, by the way, that many of these examples come from Victorian writers: Stevenson, Dickens, Stoker, J. S. Le Fanu, Henry James. Why? Because there was so much the Victorians couldn't write about directly, chiefly sex and sexuality, they found ways of transforming those taboo subjects and issues into other forms. The Victorians were masters of sublimation. But even today, when there are no limits on subject matter or treatment, writers still use ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and all manner of scary things to symbolize various aspects of our more common reality.

Try this for a dictum: ghosts and vampires are never only about ghosts and vampires.

Here's where it gets a little tricky, though: the ghosts and vampires don't always have to appear in visible forms. Sometimes the really scary bloodsuckers are entirely human. Let's look at another Victorian with experience in ghost and non-ghost genres, Henry James. James is known, of course, as a master, perhaps the master, of psychological realism; if you want massive novels with sentences as long and convoluted as the Missouri River, James is your man. At the same time, though, he has some shorter works that feature ghosts and demonic possession, and those are fun in their own way, as well as a good deal more accessible. His novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is about a governess who tries, without success, to protect the two children in her care from a particularly nasty ghost who seeks to take possession of them. Either that or it's about an insane governess who fantasizes that a ghost is taking over the children in her care, and in her delusion literally smothers them with protectiveness. Or just possibly it's about an insane governess who is dealing with a particularly nasty ghost who tries to take possession of her wards. Or possibly...well, let's just say that the plot calculus is tricky and that much depends on the perspective of the reader. So we have a story in which a ghost features prominently even if we're never sure whether he's really there or not, in which the psychological state of the governess matters greatly, and in which the life of a child, a little boy, is consumed. Between the two of them, the governess and the "specter" destroy him. One might say that the story is about fatherly neglect (the stand-in for the father simply abandons the children to the governess's care) and smothering maternal concern. Those two thematic elements are encoded into the plot of the novella. The particulars of the encoding are carried by the details of the ghost story. It just so happens that James has another famous story, "Daisy Miller" (1878), in which there are no ghosts, no demonic possession, and nothing more mysterious than a midnight trip to the Colosseum in Rome. Daisy is a young American woman who does as she pleases, thus upsetting the rigid social customs of the European society she desperately wants to approve of her. Winterbourne, the man whose attention she desires, while both attracted to and repulsed by her, ultimately proves too fearful of the disapproval of his established expatriate American community to pursue her further. After numerous misadventures, Daisy dies, ostensibly by contracting malaria on her midnight jaunt. But you know what really kills her? Vampires.

No, really. Vampires. I know I told you there weren't any supernatural forces at work here. But you don't need fangs and a cape to be a vampire. The essentials of the vampire story, as we discussed earlier: an older figure representing corrupt, outworn values; a young, preferably virginal female; a stripping away of her youth, energy, virtue; a continuance of the life force of the old male; the death or destruction of the young woman. Okay, let's see now. Winterbourne and Daisy carry associations of winter - death, cold - and spring - life, flowers, renewal - that ultimately come into conflict (we'll talk about seasonal implications in a later chapter), with winter's frost destroying the delicate young flower. He is considerably older than she, closely associated with the stifling Euro-Anglo-American society. She is fresh and innocent - and here is James's brilliance - so innocent as to appear to be a wanton. He and his aunt and her circle watch Daisy and disapprove, but because of a hunger to disapprove of

someone, they never cut her loose entirely. They play with her yearning to become one of them, taxing her energies until she begins to wane. Winterbourne mixes voyeurism, vicarious thrills, and stiff-necked disapproval, all of which culminate when he finds her with a (male) friend at the Colosseum and chooses to ignore her. Daisy says of his behavior, “He cuts me dead!” That should be clear enough for anyone. His, and his clique’s, consuming of Daisy is complete; having used up everything that is fresh and vital in her, he leaves her to waste away. Even then she asks after him. But having destroyed and consumed her, he moves on, not sufficiently touched, it seems to me, by the pathetic spectacle he has caused.

So how does all this tie in with vampires? Is James a believer in ghosts and spooks? Does “Daisy Miller” mean he thinks we’re all vampires? Probably not. I believe what happens here and in other stories and novels (*The Sacred Fount* [1901] comes to mind) is that he deems the figure of the consuming spirit or vampiric personality a useful narrative vehicle. We find this figure appearing in different guises, even under nearly opposite circumstances, from one story to another. On the one hand, in *The Turn of the Screw*, he uses the literal vampire or the possessing spook to examine a certain sort of psychosocial imbalance. These days we’d give it a label, a dysfunctional something or other, but James probably only saw it as a problem in our approach to child rearing or a psychic neediness in young women whom society disregards and discards. On the other hand, in “Daisy Miller,” he employs the figure of the vampire as an emblem of the way society – polite, ostensibly normal society – battens on and consumes its victims.

Nor is James the only one. The nineteenth century was filled with writers showing the thin line between the ordinary and the monstrous. Edgar Allan Poe. J.S. Le Fanu, whose ghost stories made him the Stephen King of his day. Thomas Hardy, whose poor heroine in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) provides table fare for the disparate hungers of the men in her life. Or virtually any novel of the naturalistic movement of the late nineteenth century, where the law of the jungle and survival of the fittest reign. Of course, the twentieth century also provided plenty of instances of social vampirism and cannibalism. Franz Kafka, a latter-day Poe, uses the dynamic in stories like “The Metamorphosis” (1915) and “A Hunger Artist” (1924), where, in a nifty reversal of the traditional vampire narrative, crowds of onlookers watch as the artist’s fasting consumes him. Gabriel García Márquez’s heroine Innocent Eréndira, in the tale bearing her name (1972), is exploited and put out to prostitution by her heartless grandmother. D. H. Lawrence gave us any number of short stories where characters devour and destroy one another in life-and-death contests of will, novellas like “The Fox” (1923) and even novels like *Women in Love* (1920), in which Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich, although ostensibly in love with one another, each realize that only one of them can survive and so engage in mutually destructive behavior. Iris Murdoch – pick a novel, any novel. Not for nothing did she call one of her books *A Severed Head* (1961), although *The Unicorn* (1963) would work splendidly here, with its wealth of phony gothic creepiness. There are works, of course, where the ghost or vampire is merely a gothic cheap thrill without any particular thematic or symbolic significance, but such works tend to be short-term commodities without much staying power in readers’ minds or the public arena. We’re haunted only while we’re reading. In those works that continue to haunt us, however, the figure of the cannibal, the vampire, the succubus, the spook announces itself again and again where someone grows in strength by weakening someone else.

That’s what this figure really comes down to, whether in Elizabethan, Victorian, or more modern incarnations: exploitation in its many forms. Using other people to get what we want. Denying someone else’s right to live in the face of our overwhelming demands. Placing our desires, particularly our uglier ones, above the needs of another. That’s pretty much what the vampire does, after all. He wakes up in the morning – actually the evening, now that I think about it – and says something like, “In order to

remain undead, I must steal the life force of someone whose fate matters less to me than my own." I've always supposed that Wall Street traders utter essentially the same sentence. My guess is that as long as people act toward their fellows in exploitative and selfish ways, the vampire will be with us.

4 - If It's Square, It's a Sonnet

EVERY FEW CLASS PERIODS, I'll begin discussion by asking the class what form the poem under consideration employs. That first time, the correct answer will be "sonnet." The next time it happens, "sonnet." Care to guess about the third? Very astute. Basically, I figure the sonnet is the only poetic form the great majority of readers ever needs to know. First, most readers will go through life without ever doing any intensive study of poetry, while many poetic forms require in-depth analysis to be recognized. Moreover, there just aren't that many villanelles in the world for us to see them very often. The sonnet, on the other hand, is blessedly common, has been written in every era since the English Renaissance, and remains very popular with poets and readers today. Best of all, it has a look. Other forms require mnemonic assistance. It doesn't take any great sagacity to know that Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte" (1909) is actually a sestina, but I for one am very grateful that he labels it as to form. We would notice that something funny is going on, that in fact he uses the same six words to end the lines in every stanza, but who has a name for that? We can learn to put the name "villanelle" to Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" (1953), but most readers don't carry that information around with them. Or need to, really. Is the quality of your life harmed by not recognizing on sight something like the rondeau? That's what I thought. And so, unless your ambitions have been spurred by this discussion, I'll stick to the sonnet, for one single reason: no other poem is so versatile, so ubiquitous, so various, so agreeably short as the sonnet.

After I tell the students that first time that it's a sonnet, half of them groan in belated recognition (often they know but think I have a hidden agenda or a trick up my sleeve) and the others ask me how I knew that so fast. I tell them two things. First, that I read the poem before class (useful for someone in my position, or theirs, come to think of it), and second, that I counted the lines when I noticed the geometry of the poem. Which is? they ask. Well, I respond, trying to milk the moment for all its suspense - it's square. The miracle of the sonnet, you see, is that it is fourteen lines long and written almost always in iambic pentameter. I don't want to bog down in the whole matter of meter right now, but suffice it to say that most lines are going to have ten syllables and the others will be very close to ten. And ten syllables of English are about as long as fourteen lines are high: square.

Okay, great, so I can identify one type of poem, you say. Who cares? I agree, to a point. I think people who read poems for enjoyment should always read the poem first, without a formal or stylistic care in the world. They should not begin by counting lines, or looking at line endings to find the rhyme scheme, if any, just as I think people should read novels without peeking at the ending: just enjoy the experience. After you've had your first pleasure, though, one of the additional pleasures is seeing how the poet worked that magic on you. There are many ways a poem can charm the reader: choice of images, music of the language, idea content, cleverness of wordplay. And at least some part of the answer, if that magic came in a sonnet, is form.

You might suppose that a poem of a mere fourteen lines is only capable of achieving one effect. And you'd be right. It can't have epic scope, it can't undertake subplots, it can't carry much narrative weight. But you'd also be wrong. It can do two things. A sonnet, in fact, we might think of as having two units of meaning, closely related, to be sure, but with a shift of some sort taking place between them. Those two content units correspond closely to the two parts into which the form typically breaks. The sonnet has been a big part of English poetry since the 1500s, and there are a few major types of sonnet and myriad variations. But most of them have two parts, one of eight lines and one of six lines. A Petrarchan sonnet uses a rhyme scheme that ties the first eight lines (the octave) together, followed by a rhyme scheme that unifies the last six (the sestet). A Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, tends to divide up by four: the first four lines (or quatrain), the next four, the third four, and the last

four, which turn out to be only two (a couplet). But even here, the first two groups of four have some unity of meaning, as do the third four and the last two. Shakespeare himself often works a statement of its own into that last couplet, but it also usually ties in pretty closely with the third quatrain. All these technical terms, and it's not even physics; still, who can say that a poem isn't engineered? Sometimes, especially in the modern and postmodern period, those units slip and slide a little, and the octave doesn't quite contain its meaning, which may, for instance, carry over onto the ninth line, but still, the basic pattern is 8/6. To see how all this works, let's look at an example.

Christina Rossetti was a significant minor British poet of the late nineteenth century, although not so well known as her older brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a poet, painter, and leader in the artistic Pre-Raphaelite movement. This is her poem "An Echo from Willow-Wood" (ca. 1870). I suggest you read it out loud to get the full effect:

Two gazed into a pool, he gazed and she,
Not hand in hand, yet heart in heart, I think,
Pale and reluctant
on the water's brink,
As on the brink of parting which must be,
Each eyed the other's aspect, she and he,
Each felt one hungering heart leap up and sink,
Each tasted bitterness which both must drink,
There on the brink of life's dividing sea.
Lilies upon the surface, deep below
Two wistful faces craving each for each,
Resolute and reluctant without speech:
- A sudden ripple made the faces flow,
One moment joined, to vanish out of reach:
So those hearts joined, and ah were parted so.

It's a terrific little poem in its own right, and a good poem for our purposes. For one thing, it has neither a thee nor a thou in sight, not an e'er nor an o'er, so we eliminate some of that ball of confusion that older poetry slings at hapless modern readers. Moreover, I like Christina Rossetti, and I think more people should be able to fall in love with her.

At first glance, the poem doesn't really look square. True, but it's close, and that's how the eye will initially perceive it. So the first question: how many sentences? Note that I'm not asking for lines, of which there are of course fourteen, but for sentences. The answer is two. What we're interested in here is the most basic unit of meaning in a poem. Lines and stanzas are necessities in poetry, but if the poem is any good, its basic unit of meaning is the sentence, just as in all other writing. That's why if you stop at the end of every line, a poem makes no sense: it's arranged in lines, but written in sentences. Second question: without counting, can you guess where the first period falls?

Right. End of line eight. The octave is a single unit of meaning.

What Rossetti does here is construct her sentences, which have to carry her meaning, so that they work within the form she has chosen. Her rhyme scheme proves to be a little idiosyncratic, since she elects to repeat the same rhymes in both quatrains of the octave: abbaabba. Then she picks an equally uncommon rhyme scheme for the sestet: cddcdc. Still, in each case the particular pattern reinforces the basic concept - these eight lines carry one idea, those six another, related idea. In the octave, she creates a static picture of two lovers on the verge of an event. Everything in it points to the imminence of their parting, three times using the word "brink," which suggests how close to the edge of something these two lovers are. And yet with all their trepidation - full of "hungering" and "bitterness" - their surface, like that of the water, is placid. Inside, their hearts may leap up and sink, yet they show nothing, since they look not at each other but "at each other's aspect," at the reflection of the beloved in the water rather than the beloved's person. This not being able to look directly at one's lover suggests the panic of their situation. The watery images may further portend disaster in recalling the myth of Narcissus, who, falling in love with his reflection in the water, attempted to join it and so drowned. Still, no outward sign gives anything of their inner feeling away. In the sestet, though,

a puff of breeze creates a ripple and dissolves that carefully controlled image of the placid surface lilies masking the emotional turbulence underneath. The water, “the dividing sea,” which had united them in image, now effects their separation. What is possible in the octave becomes actual in the sestet.

Without making any extravagant claims – no, this is not the greatest sonnet ever written, nor the most important statement of anything – we can say that “An Echo from Willow-Wood” is an excellent specimen of its chosen form. Rossetti manages her content so that it tells a story of complex human longing and regret within the confines of a very demanding form. The beauty of this poem lies, in part, in the tension between the small package and the large emotional and narrative scene it contains. We feel that the story is in danger of breaking out of the boundaries of its vessel, but of course it never does. The vessel, the sonnet form, actually becomes part of the meaning of the poem.

And this is why form matters, and why professors pay attention to form: it just might mean something. Will every sonnet consist of only two sentences? No, that would be boring. Will they all employ this rhyme scheme? No, and they may not even have rhyme schemes. There is something called a blank sonnet, “blank” meaning it employs unrhymed lines. But when a poet chooses to write a sonnet rather than, say, John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*, it’s not because he’s lazy. One of the old French philosophers and wits, Blaise Pascal, apologized for writing a long letter, saying, “I had not time to write a short one.” Sonnets are like that, short poems that take far more time, because everything has to be perfect, than long ones.

We owe it to poets, I think, to notice that they’ve gone to this trouble, as well as to ourselves, to understand the nature of the thing we’re reading. When you start to read a poem, then, look at the shape.