Blood Relations: The Gothic Perversion of the Nuclear Family in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*

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In the vast, dark landscape of Gothic fiction in late twentieth-century America, the seminal figure of the vampire wanders in ever-increasing numbers. Much as the Gothic has seen a flowering in the past twenty-five years, the vampire has risen from the uneasy sleep of the earlier part of the century and experienced his own dark renaissance. Prior to 1976, in film and fiction, the vampire was portrayed in the mold into which he had been cast by Bram Stoker in the greatest of the nineteenth-century vampire novels, *Dracula*—an essentially solitary predator whose presence was the stimulus for an intrepid group of vampire hunters to form and bay in his pursuit, and whose time on center stage was limited to brief, menacing appearances and capped with a spectacular death scene. The vampire was, to borrow a term from film, a McGuffin—a device to drive the plot and give the vampire hunters something to pursue.

In 1976, this changed. Several years earlier, the mainstream Gothic had been brought to renewed attention by the success of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* in both its print and film versions. A young novelist named Stephen King was finding a broader audience, and in 1975 had published a "traditional" vampire novel, *'Salem's Lot*. Then, in 1976, Anne Rice published her first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*, and turned the vampire paradigm on its head. This breakthrough novel focused not on vampire hunters, but on the vampires themselves—and what a different breed they were.

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Louis, Lestat, and Claudia slept in coffins and drank blood, but throughout *Interview with the Vampire*, they preyed with impunity, they gave themselves over to introspection, and they sought and found an entire subculture based on their own peculiar existence. They existed in a different world, and the old models no longer applied. Although, given their great debt to the brooding Byronic heroes of British Romanticism, they may not have been the first sympathetic vampires, they were the first successful ones in their initial publication, and they have been followed by a host of others.

After Rice, and even in her subsequent novels in the "Vampire Chronicles" series, the vampire was used to provide a vehicle for social commentary, and vampirism itself became a convincing metaphor for such varied topics as drug addiction, homosexuality, AIDS, and the general selfishness and narcissism of the baby boomer generation. Vampire literature in itself has become a vast and varied body, and one whose many facets cannot be contained in one model (Benefiel 35). The figure of the vampire, so varying and adaptable in the hands of many authors, became a liminal, transgressive figure, a stage upon whom the fears and secret desires of society could be acted.

What is less widely recognized by readers and critics is that Rice's novel served to redefine the vampire paradigm in more ways than one. Because in most texts (although there are exceptions to this) vampires reproduce either by biting their lovers and victims and draining their blood, or by having a mortal drink their blood through force or seduction, the parent of a vampire is the vampire who made it. Deirdre Byrne points out that in *Interview with the Vampire*, when Lestat exchanges blood with Louis, turning him into a vampire, the "ritual . . . is carried out with strongly erotic overtones" (178). The male sexual penetration of the victim (with the phallic-substitute fangs) is followed by the more archetypal female nurturing of the victim, feeding him or her blood from the vampire's body. Vampire sexuality has been the focus of many studies, and it is not intended that this article cover that well-trodden ground. For example, Christopher Craft's essay, "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's Dracula," sees the vampire novel as exemplifying fear of the homosexual "other," and feels that the Gothic offers the expulsion of the other and the removal of the threat of the monster to provide "comforting closure" to the text (107–08). On the other hand, John Allen Stevenson explains the vampire ". . . not as a monstrous father but as a foreigner, as

someone who threatens and terrifies precisely because he is an outsider" (139). In "Anne Rice and the Queering of Culture," George E. Haggerty insists on a homosexual interpretation of Rice's work. In short, as James B. Twitchell wrote in 1985, "Clearly the vampire . . . has more going for him than just being the resident demon in Christian folklore. For the last few generations he has also served to explain the dynamics of human social and sexual behavior. And it is here, especially as a paradigm of suppressed interfamilial struggles, that the vampire has become a central figure in popular culture" (110).

Despite the general perception, particularly in vampire film, of the vampire as a solitary predator, many texts have sought to portray the vampire as a part of a family grouping. The figuratively incestuous family of vampires can be traced in rudimentary form to Stoker's *Dracula* (it would seem that everything in vampire fiction descends from the grand old man of the genre); Dracula is first presented in his Transylvanian castle with three brides/daughters, who are barely restrained from bringing the visiting Jonathan Harker into the fold (Stoker 71–73), an image carried over from the novel into the 1931 film. Anne Rice, however, expanded on this considerably in *Interview with the Vampire*, making the nuclear family of vampires a major theme in her novel. And as we will see, where she broadened an existing path, others turned it into a highway.

Even the establishment of a vampire family is a subversive twist on the more normal biological reproduction of children. As the vampire turns its lover into its child, the relationship is oddly incestuous, a configuration that carries over into the portrayal of the vampire family. In the bulk of vampire fiction, a master vampire functions as father, mother, and husband, with other younger vampires as children/lovers. No biological mother is necessary, and the vampire "family," isolated from human society by its extreme longevity and its essential otherness, becomes an intensely inwardly directed unit, and the blurring of normal familial relationships creates unnatural tensions. The vampire family, incestuous and blurred as it is, presents a subversive alternative model to the nuclear family.

In mainstream fiction, and especially in romance, the happy nuclear family is often presented as a goal to be achieved rather than a reality to be lived. Boy and girl meet, fall in love, suffer through vicissitudes, and finally settle down to live happily ever after in the suburbs and raise Wally and the Beaver. The happily-ever-after part is rarely shown,

however, except in sitcoms and commercials. These same fictions (not to mention real life) repeatedly give us instead the failed family, the one in which Mrs. Cleaver runs off with the Fuller Brush man, or Wally snaps and starts spraying his school with automatic weapons fire. On the other hand, the model of mother, father, and children living happily together persists in American culture. Americans are told that this model is, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary, the only acceptable way to achieve a healthy, happy, moral life. According to this view, anything else is not a family, and anything else is subversive.

What, then, does Rice present as an alternative? Oddly, her vampire family is so close to the norm as to constitute a parody. In *Interview with the Vampire*, two handsome, young male vampires, Louis and Lestat, together create a daughter. This beautiful child-vampire, named Claudia, will never physically age. And this ménage exists with apparent happiness and harmony for some sixty-five years, far beyond the length of most mortal marriages. This family has no marriage license, no college savings plan for the kids, and exists by killing unsuspecting victims. Within the family, after its creation, there is no sexual contact—normal or otherwise—between the members. Each finds release with strangers. And lest anyone doubt that sex, death, and sustenance are linked for these creatures, Louis, asked by Claudia to describe what making love as a mortal was like, eventually responds, "I think that it was the pale shadow of killing" (*Interview* 189).

Granted, this family destroys itself at length from within, but is not necessarily structured to do so. Where the "normal" family is programmed by biology to form, exist as a unit from the birth of the eldest child until the youngest has left the nest to begin the next iteration, and then metamorphose into some other configuration, the vampire family can exist for centuries without change.

As an indication of the power of the theme of the incestuous, nuclear, vampiric family, a brief look at several important vampire texts produced subsequent to *Interview with the Vampire* may prove useful.

In *The Hunger* by Whitley Streiber, the explanation of the existence of the vampire is that it is a different species, and reproduces slowly and with difficulty. Although tangential to the main plot, there is reference to the original family of the vampire Miriam Blaylock. In addition, her lovers, whom she can imbue with extended life, although not her own near immortality, form a family unit with her. She has

even married (at least in common-law) and taken the surname of her husband.

Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* presents the vampire as latch-key child. In this novel, several impromptu families of young people form, particularly the vampire group of Zillah, Molochai, Twig, and Nothing. Much is made of Nothing's orphan status until he is taken in by other vampires, and the reproduction method here is that a mortal impregnated (in the good old-fashioned genital way) by a vampire will inevitably die giving birth. The family can only consist of a father and children; no mother is possible.

Over the past decades, the vampire film has been a vital part of the development of the vampire genre. One of the key vampire films of the eighties is Joel Schumacher's *The Lost Boys*. In this film, the attempt is made to form a sort of vampiric Brady bunch by blending the vampire children of a father-figure master vampire with the family of a single mother. The film also includes a young woman who is a maternal figure/protector of a young boy being drawn into the vampire group, contrasted with the concerned but ultimately negligent mother of the living family.

The television series *Forever Knight* used as its nucleus a small group of vampires headed by the alternately manipulative and supportive LaCroix (a blatant echo of Lestat, right down to the blond hair), and focuses on his "son" Nick, a vampire and police detective whose main desire is to become mortal once again. Their often stormy relationship formed the subtext for many of the episodes, and is highlighted in the episode "Father's Day," which stressed their mutual dependence and enduring deep feelings for one another.

Anne Rice, of course, continued her exploration of the vampire in many other novels, of which one may serve here as an exemplar. *The Vampire Lestat*, the follow-up volume to *Interview with the Vampire*, tells the story before (and after) that of the original volume. It presents the repressive and destructive family of Lestat, whose father, portrayed as a helpless blind man in the original story, is presented in a far less sympathetic light. In a peculiarly incestuous plot twist, Lestat becomes the "father in Darkness" to his biological mother, Gabrielle, turning her into a vampire with her consent. Rice changed the direction of her series radically with this volume, focusing from this novel onward on the beauty and glamour of vampire life, and spending less time on Louis's melancholy introspection.

The many novels of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Saint-Germain series present a vampire who is usually far more humane than the mortals with whom he interacts throughout history. In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach characterizes the series.

> In virtually every novel, Saint-Germain tries to rescue a grand woman in thrall to a sadistic patriarchal system by transforming her into a vampire. Sometimes the saving transformation succeeds . . . More often, though, the woman is disheartened or dismembered before she can turn. No matter when they live, civilization offers Yarbro's women no recourse but transformation or destruction. (148)

An example of the series, *Tempting Fate* (Yarbro) shows Saint-Germain's odd (and oddly happy) nuclear family, consisting of the ancient vampire, his ghoul servant, and an orphaned Russian girl he has adopted, set in contrast to a neighboring family of mortals. In the mortal family, the wife, Gudrun, is forced to care for her invalid husband, wastrel brother, and a moldering castle full of servants. She eventually rejects Saint-Germain's offer to make her an immortal vampire, turning in preference to a lesbian relationship with her cook.

The nuclear family in *Interview with the Vampire* remains, however, the most extensively and carefully realized of the fictional vampire families, and deserves a closer examination.

Anne Rice came to write *Interview with the Vampire* as a means of coping with her self-destructive grief over the death of her young daughter Michele, according to biographer Katherine Ramsland, who deals with this topic at length (126–73). The echoes of Rice's near-breakdown may be found in the character of Madelaine, an insane Parisian dollmaker who yearns obsessively for her own dead daughter, reproducing her endlessly in the faces of her dolls (*Interview* 187). Madelaine wants to be a mother to Claudia, to have at last a child who cannot die (241).

The vampire family is a key topic in *Interview with the Vampire*. Throughout the novel, images of kinship abound; Lestat and Louis constantly refer to Claudia as their daughter, and themselves as her "fathers"—and even, on occasion, as her mother. Lestat, always deeply ironic, proclaims before the coming of Claudia, "I want a child tonight. I am like a mother . . . I want a child!" (*Interview* 79). Whether he refers to his prey in the same manner one might discuss a preference for a cuisine, or whether he is stating his intent to make a child vampire, is

debatable. Most probably, he means both. Louis's images of family are less double edged, almost sentimental as he remembers life with Claudia:

> And, carrying her to her crib, I sat beside her and sang to her, and she stared at me as she clung to that doll, as if trying blindly and mysteriously to calm a pain that she herself did not begin to understand. Can you picture it, this splendid domesticity, dim lamps, the vampire father singing to the vampire daughter? (*Interview* 179)

Claudia, the child vampire, is made specifically to provide a companion for Louis. The whole scene reads like a couple having a child in an attempt to make a failing relationship once more viable. The language of these characters is full of references to fathers, daughters, children.

> Now Lestat stood up and scooped her from the floor and came towards me. "She's our daughter," he said. "You're going to live with us now." He beamed at her, but his eyes were cold, as if it were all a horrible joke; then he looked at me, and his face had conviction . . . She looked about and said that it was a pretty room, very pretty, but she wanted her mama . . . "Your mama's left you with us. She wants you to be happy," he was saying . . . "She knows we can make you very happy." (*Interview* 83)
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> "Now, Louis was going to leave us," said Lestat, his eyes moving from my face to hers. "He was going to go away. But now he's not. Because he wants to stay and take care of you and make you happy." He looked at me. "You're not going, are you, Louis?"
>
> "You bastard!" I whispered to him. "You fiend!"
>
> "Such language in front of your daughter," he said.
>
> "I'm not your daughter," she said with the silvery voice. "I'm my mama's daughter."
>
> "No, dear, not anymore," he said to her. He glanced at the window, and then he shut the bedroom door behind us and turned the key in the lock. "You're our daughter, Louis's daughter and my daughter, do you see? Now, whom should you sleep with? Louis or me?" And then looking at me, he said, "Perhaps you should sleep with Louis. After all, when I'm tired . . . I'm not so kind." (*Interview* 84)

Of course, as in real life, having a baby to save a relationship is not an optimal decision, and the irony, especially in Lestat's words, gives the action an even darker and more perverse character.

Louis and Lestat are the surrogate parents of the orphaned Claudia, although Louis is, in many ways, also her lover. Louis speaks of her in

much the same way any new parent would characterize a new infant in the household: ". . . our life was much changed with Mademoiselle Claudia, as you can imagine" (*Interview* 86). Like a new mother, he dotes on the child, showing her how to live in her new surroundings, with her new requirements. Lestat, more of a father figure, instructs her how to hunt and kill. Lestat, Louis says, ". . . was loving to her, proud of her beauty, anxious to teach her that we must kill to live and that we ourselves could never die" (87).

The maternal vampire is an interesting figure in itself. Much has been written on the homosexual nature of the vampire, but other angles may be explored. "To be turned into a vampire is to return to the mother. The vampire, the monstrous, is ultimately maternal, and the experience of initiation is preoedipal" (Doane and Hodges 235). A vampire figure that is simultaneously viewed as maternal and as a male homosexual seems contradictory. Perhaps instead the vampire should be viewed as a pangendered construct in which traditional male and female genders are combined to form a new whole. After all, although the fangs of the vampire possess the penetrative function and power of the phallus, the life-giving fluid is received into the body through the vagina-like oral cavity. The vampire gives immortality through blood being sucked from it, an image paralleling maternal nursing. Vampires in modern vampire fiction do not seem to differentiate between male or female lovers/victims; they lie down with women and men as the occasion provides. Most can be characterized, if anything, as bisexual. Homosexual or heterosexual seem irrelevant to the nature of vampirism, and unduly limiting. Vampires as they appear in fiction today transcend the bonds of gender as surely as they have transcended the bonds of mortality.

In 1994, director Neil Jordan filmed *Interview with the Vampire* from a screenplay by Anne Rice. The film, while remarkably faithful to its source material, does provide some visual shortcuts in establishing the familial nature of the relationship between the three main characters. Jordan was quoted as saying, "In many ways I'm telling the story of a deeply dysfunctional family, except the family unit here is two vampires, Lestat and Louis, and their 'adopted' child Claudia" (Jones 24). On film, the treatment of Claudia as a favored child is highlighted by Lestat's manner toward her, with caresses and endearments. He pets her, strokes her cheek, and chucks her gently under the chin while praising her extravagantly. That this is done primarily to irritate Louis

is perhaps beside the point. They are, as Lestat says, "One happy family." The many scenes that follow of Claudia's life in her new family, and her early transgressions against the family rules, are played as a parody of normality. Seamstresses are brought in to make beautiful clothes for her, tutors are hired to teach her, and like the greedy and unrestrained child she is, she kills them. Lestat, in the movie a more active parent than Louis, chides her for killing victims too close to home, but her punishment is a literal slap on the wrist. These scenes are humorous and chilling precisely because they are so close to reality. They also call to mind the Gothic sitcoms of the 1960s. Claudia's peer group must surely include Eddie Munster and Wednesday Addams.

Even vampire children whose bodies do not age grow up, however, and this is the crux of the conflict within Lestat's little family in both novel and film. The point is hammered home repeatedly in the novel. As Claudia matures psychologically, she becomes more and more Louis's lover. Louis describes their strange, incestuous relationship explicitly. He calls her and himself "Father and Daughter. Lover and Lover" (*Interview* 90). They have spent years sleeping away their days together in the same coffin, and it is a sign of her growing dissatisfaction with her life when she alters the arrangement.

> She wanted a coffin of her own now, which left me more wounded than I would let her see. I walked out after giving her my gentlemanly consent; for how many years had I slept with her as of she were a part of me I couldn't know. (91)

This same situation in the film is handled slightly differently. Claudia gets her own coffin, but is shown in the late afternoon coming back to crawl in with her indulgent papa, like a child who has awoken from a nightmare seeks the security of a parent's bed.

In addition, the breakdown of the family in *Interview with the Vampire* contains strong overtones of adolescent rebelliousness. Claudia, as she matures, begins to ask difficult questions about her origins, and later, about vampires generally. They have lived in isolation in New Orleans, and Claudia and Louis begin to defy Lestat, challenging his reticence about their vampiric natures. Claudia and Lestat indulge in screaming matches, and Lestat, like any father of a teenager, is at a loss to understand: " 'What's the matter with her?' he flared at me [Louis], as though I'd given birth to her and must know" (*Interview* 94). These touches intensify the feeling that what we are seeing is not some

ethereal fantasy involving impossible creatures, but rather a domestic drama that closely resembles ordinary family life. We may laugh at this, or find it shocking and perverse, but nonetheless we recognize the players and the game. Claudia's comment to Lestat, "I meant what I said. I'm weary of arguing with you. Hell is hatred, people living together in eternal hatred. We're not in hell . . . I don't care. It doesn't matter. Only let's have an end to all this. Before Louis, in disgust, leaves us both" (118), shows the weariness engendered by familial bickering, and the growing contempt she holds for her situation.

"A gothic text positions its reader in a potential space where the psyche's repressed desires and the society's foreclosed issues can be engaged and thus where healing can occur" (Veeder 32). The family group of *Interview with the Vampire*, as well as subsequent iterations of the vampire family, allows the reader to explore issues of alternative family structures and incestuous attraction within the family, and to play out the consequences for good or ill of these imagined scenarios. The vampire, aloof from human considerations, nonetheless stands in for the reader. Whether the nuclear family, either in its distorted but disturbingly realistic portrayal in *Interview with the Vampire* or in a more prosaic setting, remains a viable mode of existence at the turn of the twenty-first century is a question that readers and viewers must answer for themselves. Anne Rice's creation, the vampire Louis de Pont du Lac, loses his mortal family, and later, his immortal family, when Claudia and Madelaine are killed in Paris in a replay of that ancient trauma. After that, he loses what had remained of his humanity, what might be termed his soul. The need for family, in whatever configuration, remains constant.

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