

A Psychological Analysis of the Vampire Myth

Steven Kimberley

University of Essex

Abstract

The myth of the vampire is both ancient and modern: elements have changed over time but the essence of the myth has stayed the same; this is true across different cultures and civilizations. The paper argues that the hardness of the myth can be partly explained by its significance to the human mind, the depth of which can be revealed through application of the psychoanalytical theories of Jung and Freud. These theoretical perspectives shed new light on the myth and demonstrate its versatility as a vehicle for the expression of our most primitive fears and fixations.

Keywords: Vampire myth, psychology, psychological analysis.

Essay

One of the most famous and widely known myths throughout the world – particularly across western civilisation, where it has remained ripe throughout literature along with numerous other forms of media, maintaining a constant presence in popular culture – is that of the vampire.

Whilst the vampire myth presented in society today appears modern, it is in fact a cultural reconstruction of a vampiric demon, present in myth and literature in countless forms throughout many human societies, making it one of the oldest examples of myth in the world. In fact, the oldest recorded example of the vampire myth comes from a Babylonian prayer, thousands of years old: “Spirits that minish the land, of great strength... knowing no mercy, they can rage against mankind.

They spill blood like rain, devouring flesh and sucking their veins. They are the demons of full violence, ceaselessly devouring blood” (Thompson, 1903: 124). Examples are also present in ancient Greek and Chinese literature.

Although the essence of the vampire myth has remained constant throughout human society, countless variations of the myth have been spawned across the span of its existence. For example, what originated as a vampiric demon of unknown origin in the ancient world has gradually adapted into its most recent form of the contagious and evil un-dead creature of popular culture and fiction.

The transformation of this myth, in some instances, is purely a result of two separate societies independently developing their own form of the myth; alternatively, it could also be a result of the psychological process of reconstructive memory. The psychologist, Frederic Barlett, claimed that as a result of schemas (a psychological element of memory in which your own social expectations create a bias upon recollection), stories and myths can be gradually altered over time. The result of reconstructive memory is that factors may be ‘edited’ in order to better suit the social expectations and values of the society in which the myth is being told. This may explain variations in the vampire myth, such as the ancient Chinese belief that “a dead body may become a vampire if anything bestial like a cat or dog jumps over it” (Mascetti, 1991: 78), which has been slowly transformed into the contagious bite of the modern myth.

These variations of the vampire myth can also be simple misinterpretations of previous forms of the myth. For example in literature such as Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula’, or Anne Rice’s ‘Interview with the Vampire’, a wooden stake driven through the heart of a vampire is sufficient to kill them. This concept of the wooden stake originated in Scotland where “bodies suspected of being vampires were staked to the earth during their burial” (Wickwar, 1925: 146) in order to prevent them from returning to life and emerging from their grave as a vampire.

So upon consideration of these different forms of the vampire myth, its constant presence throughout the civilizations of history suggests that there is something about the myth that carries great importance and significance to the minds of humans, binding the myth to our history. One explanation for the fascination with the vampire myth can be provided by the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung.

To Jung, the human psyche shares “collective universal images and motifs which come from the collective unconscious” (Stevens, 1990: 22). These characterisations or ‘archetypes’ usually originate from an emotion or event that is central to the psychology of all humans. This is how Jung explained the presence of the same myths throughout history, and in the instance of the vampire myth, can provide a highly credible explanation.

In Jungian terms, the vampire itself is one of the main archetypes of the human psyche and is sometimes referred to as one of the images associated with the archetypal character, ‘the Shadow’, one of the most negative of all archetypes. So the image of the vampire is embedded into the collective unconscious of all human minds as a result of its emotional and psychological significance to human beings, thereby explaining its continuous presence in myth and literature, regardless of cultural variations.

This can be explained by the theory that all conscious beings (not just humans) are born with, or at least quickly develop, a natural instinct to fear and avoid theft from other beings. This autonomous recognition and fear of theft, is one of the most basic animal instincts of the id. The vampire represents the epitome of this natural fear of theft in the psychology of humans. Therefore it could be claimed that the formation of the character of the vampire comes from the idea of vampirism being the darkest and most extreme form of theft, naturally feared by all humans. Jung saw “blood standing for life: the archetypal symbol for the soul” (Anon., 1999). Through the vampire’s parasitic stealing of one’s very life-force and soul in order to sustain itself, we can clearly see how the image of the vampire has become a natural psychological characterization of one of humanity’s deepest and most primitive fears.

This ‘archetypal’ explanation of the vampire myth also withstands the cultural variations of the vampire myth. While there are countless variations of the myth in terms of the vampire’s origins, powers and weaknesses – the result of the society in which the variations are created – they all share the common factors which form the psychological archetype: the un-human creature that feeds on the life-force of humans.

Another psychological perspective that can be adopted to analyse the vampire myth is the psychodynamic approach of Sigmund Freud. Freud’s attitudes towards the vampire myth would likely be typical of his ‘dream analyses’, whereby any kind of dream imagery implies some form of

unconscious sexual wish fulfilment. For instance, Freudian psychoanalysis claims that “morbid dread always signifies repressed sexual wishes... the vampire is a kind of phantom projection produced by the medium’s desire to be possessed, controlled and vampirised”(Rickels, 1999: 19).

In terms of id-conflict, the vampire itself represents the unconscious human mind. The id is said to “dominate the unconscious part of the personality with a primitive disregard for social rules in pursuit of self gratification... driven by the pleasure principle” (Flanagan, 2004: 887). The vampire’s violent bloodlust and lack of social emotions such as conscience may depict the unconscious sexual and primitive desires of the id. The vampire’s representation of the id’s dominance over the ego and superego, which act to “suppress and regulate the demands of the id in terms of social demands” (Flanagan, 2004: 886), can be seen in the way that the vampire characters in the myths are always described as inhuman, emphasising the loss of humanity through this regression to an animal-like state of mind. This idea of the animalistic personality is further emphasised through numerous modern variations of the vampire myth in which the vampire possesses the ability to shift physical form into that of an animal, as is the case with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, who can both “transform himself into wolf... [and] be as a bat” (Stoker, 1897).

This dominance of the id can be further explored as a regression to the mental state of a child’s psychosexual development. The vampire’s popular depiction of prolonged incisors making pointed fangs could be small pointed phallic symbols used to indicate and amplify the ‘oral aggression’ of vampires. Oral aggression is the result of under indulgence during the oral stage of a child’s psychosexual development, most commonly in terms of breastfeeding and other forms of sustenance. This can be seen in all cases of the vampire myth through their thirst and “aggressive obsession for pleasure and gratification and need to sustain themselves” (Flanagan, 2004: 887) through the Oedipal sucking of blood from the body of their victims. This personality trait of the orally aggressive character in which the id claims dominance over the ego and superego is a striking feature in the character of vampires.

The deeply sexual nature of the oral aggression of vampires can be further understood if we were to imagine the removal of the teeth of a vampire. The teeth are used as an obviously sexual image of penetrating others in order to fulfil the id’s demands for pleasure; their removal acts as a kind of castration of vampires, rendering them impotent in their need for oral gratification just as castration

renders males impotent in terms of sexual gratification. This follows Freud's theory of 'castration anxiety', further justifying the idea of the vampire myth representing the unconscious sexual desires within humans as a result of personality ego-conflict.

Another feature that is characteristic of modern variations of the vampire myth is that of the vampire's representation as a highly sexual being. The portrayal of the vampire in modern adaptations such as Anne Rice's 'Interview With The Vampire' still features the dated appearance of the Gothic-Romantic era through elements such as language and costume in order to highlight the profound sexual characteristics that the vampire has come to represent.

More obviously, the character of the Count from Bram Stoker's 'Dracula', has an undeniable fascination with young women. This can be seen in the three beautiful vampire brides over whom he has complete control. This is shown through the way he commands them whilst rescuing Jonathan from their mercy: "How dare you touch him when I have forbidden it... he belongs to me" (Stoker, 1897). Another example of this fascination is Dracula's desire to bite virtuous young women before they are married. During the novel, Dracula inflicts his bite – which has already been identified as being a highly sexual image – upon both Mina and Lucy while they are engaged to be married: a crude psychosexual image of virginity-taking. This highly sexual behaviour seen in the Count has become a stereotypical image of the male vampire attacking pure young women and, in doing so, removing their purity. After her encounter with Count Dracula, "Lucy changes from a silly, giggly girl to a powerfully erotic woman" (Anon., 1992).

This highly aggressive and sexual fascination that has become associated with the vampire myth could also be representative of "sexual obsession and deviances" (Flanagan, 2004: 886) which is the result of phallic aggression developed during the genital stage of human psychosexual development. This possibility provides further support for the Freudian psychodynamic idea that the vampire myth is a psychological representation of the unconscious desires within the human mind.

The common depiction of vampires being unable to venture out into the light of the sun may represent the id's rejection or inability to function within society or in regulation with the ego and superego in cases of vampirism. The daylight in this image represents society, which sleeps during the night when the vampires are awake and vice-versa. Dracula's obsession with earth, which he fills his coffin with and ships to England along with himself, is equally revealing. This can be viewed

as an Oedipal obsession with the natural earth, in this instance representing the character of the mother. So through retreating to his coffin along with the earth that it contains, we are presented with an image of “an Oedipal regression back to the womb” (Rickels, 1999: 23) and a further rejection of society and life.

The killing of vampires is another aspect of the vampire myth which has strong Freudian imagery. The use of knives, as used to kill Dracula – “Jonathan’s great knife... plunged into the heart” (Stoker, 1897) – or the more popular stake, are obvious phallic symbols. These pointed phallic symbols are, in Freudian terms, images of power which are used in the sexually aggressive image of penetrating the vampire in order to overpower and ultimately defeat. The superiority with which vampires are presented to us through the myth – for example their eternal life and the fact that humans are ultimately their sustenance and therefore inferiors – makes the slaying of vampires by humans recall the strong Oedipal image of the inferior son killing the father.

Similarly, the mythical depiction of defensive effects of religious icons, such as crucifixes and holy water, can be viewed as psychologically significant. In terms of psychodynamic analysis, the religious devices used to suppress the vampire (a representation of the sexual and aggressive nature of the id), could be a psychological representation of how religion is used in life in order to help suppress the sexual and aggressive demands of one’s own id. The religious guidelines, if followed, would be forced upon the id by the ego and superego, repressing these aggressive and sexual unconscious desires.

An element of the vampire myth which appears in Bran Stoker’s ‘Dracula’ is that “he may not enter anywhere at the first, unless there be some one of the household who bid him to come” (Stoker, 1897). So, whilst at home, one is perfectly safe from vampires, unless tricked into inviting them in. From a Freudian perspective this supports the idea of the vampire myth being a form of wish fulfilment and that the emotions of vampirism lie dormant in our unconscious. Through this factor of the myth, one is technically free from vampirism unless one chooses otherwise, strongly supporting the psychodynamic approach to the vampire myth.

One modern literary adaptation of the vampire myth, ‘Twilight’ by Stephanie Mayer, uses social and religious imagery within the story. The story entails a vampire resisting against the natural demands of the id, for the love of a human. This adaptation of the vampire myth, whilst being a

metaphor for chastity, focuses on the power of the ego over the id during personality conflict, which is ultimately ignored by most variations of the vampire myth which only focus upon what lies dormant in the unconscious desires of the id.

Another modern adaptation of the vampire myth that explores Jung's archetypal ideologies surrounding the vampire myth is Richard Matheson's novel 'I Am Legend'. The author presents the primitive fear of vampirism in its most extreme form in which the protagonist Robert Neville has had his entire world stolen from him as a result of vampirism, leaving him the only remaining human. This represents the fear felt by an 'anal retentive' personality which can be seen in Robert Neville as he attempts to regain control over the world that has been stolen from him. Another psychological factor of this book is how Neville discovers that, throughout the vampire world, he has become the object of fear, suggesting that the unconscious sexual and aggressive instincts that the vampires represent may only seem unacceptable as a result of society that regulates the ego and superego. In a society where the id is dominant, it is the ego and superego that may be viewed as evil. This suggests that psychology can only dictate as much as the society, which it is within, will allow.

While the vampire myth has always been the subject of fear – a characterisation of a primal fear of emotions within the human unconscious – it may have also served another purpose. Psychologically, although fearing this mythical being, humans have possibly embraced the myth through its potential to provide answers to some of life's more problematic questions. This can be seen through the overtly Christian elements surrounding many modern variations of the vampire myth, such as the aforementioned Christian icons that can be used as a defence against the vampires. Freud saw religion as "not based on truth, but rather infantile wishes" (Lear, 2005: 204), suggesting that one of the reasons behind the human fascination with vampires may be a confirmation of faith in religious beliefs which the myth is able to provide, such as life after death.

In summary, the ancient myth of the vampire, which has resonated throughout human civilisation for thousands of years, has undeniable significance in the psychology of humans. Whilst both Jungian interpretation and the Freudian interpretation of the vampire myth are entirely credible alone, when presented together they provide far greater insight into the vampire myth. Throughout the span of its existence, the vampire myth has survived in different manifestations because of its

powerful psychological significance to the human mind. Its numerous purposes and countless variations means that the vampire myth remains immensely popular in modern culture. Could it be, then, that the vampire myth is one of our most important in revealing the nature and processes of the human mind?

References

Anonymous lecturer (1992) *The Vampire Archetype*, Tallahassee Centre for Jungian and Gnostic Studies (source: <http://Jungian.info/Library.cfm?idsLibrary=9>)

Flanagan, Cara (2004) *Psychology: third edition (unit 29; approaches to psychology)* (Collins Publishing Ltd, London)

Lear, Jonathan (2005) *Freud* (Routledge, New York)

Mascetti , Manuella Dunn (1991) *Chronicles of the Vampire* (Bloomsbury publishing Ltd)

Rickels, Lawrence. A (1999) *The Vampire Lectures* (The University of Minnesota press)

Stevens, Anthony (1990) *Archetype: A Natural History of the Self* (Routledge)

Stoker, Bram (1999 [1897]) *Dracula* (Scholastic Classics Publishing)

Thompson , R. Campbell (1903) *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia* (Kessinger, London)

Wickwar, J.W. (1925). *Handbook of the Black Arts* (Herbert Jenkins Ltd, London).

©Steven Kimberley This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY).