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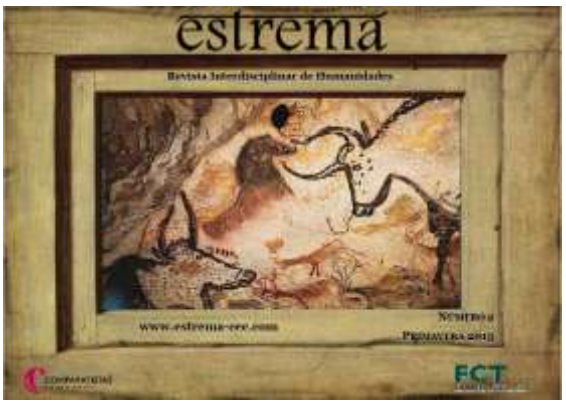

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‘Salem’s Lot*: How Dracula Permeates Time and Space*[1]

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Abstract:

The essay aspires to be a case study of Stephen King’s 1975 ‘Salem’s Lot (novel nominated in 2012 for the Bram Stoker Vampire Novel of the Century Award), relating it to Bram Stoker’s 1897 Dracula.

It aims to focus on the way in which King reformulates Stoker’s monster in order to apply it to a more modern reality and takes on the following starting point from King's idea: What if Jonathan Harker had bought a house for Dracula in 70’s rural Maine instead?

It will consider the roles of science, medicine and technology in the development of the plot in King’s novel. It will analyze the way they prevented belief in the supernatural, rationalizing the vampire. This will then be contrasted to how Stoker uses modernity to aid the vampire hunters.

The essay will also seek to contrast the immediate belief of a child with an adult’s firm incredulity, bearing in mind the horrors of the Vietnam War.

There will also be a reflection on the townspeople: did they produce or attract the Evil? If so, how? The essay will connect this to the idea of evil permeating time that is so present in Dracula.

Key-words: Vampires; modernity; science; medicine; technology; belief; Evil.

Resumo:

Este artigo pretende ser um estudo de caso do romance de Stephen King ‘Salem’s Lot (1975) (romance nomeado em 2012 para o Bram Stoker Vampire Novel of the Century Award), relacionando-o com *Dracula* (1897) de Bram Stoker.

Pretende-se analisar a forma com que King reformula o monstro de Stoker de forma a aplicá-lo a uma realidade mais moderna partindo da ideia de King: E se ao invés Jonathan Harker tivesse comprado uma casa para o Conde Drácula no Maine dos anos 70?

O artigo irá considerar o papel da ciência, medicina e tecnologia no desenvolvimento do enredo no romance de King. Irá analisar a forma com que estes avanços impediram a

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crença no sobrenatural, racionalizando assim o vampiro. Isto será contrastado com a forma com que Stoker utiliza a ciência, medicina e tecnologia de forma a auxiliar os caçadores de vampiros.

O artigo irá também procurar contrastar a crença imediata de uma criança com a incredulidade firme de um adulto, não esquecendo os horrores da Guerra do Vietname.

Haverá ainda uma reflexão acerca dos cidadãos: Foram eles a produzir ou atrair o Mal? Se sim, como? O artigo irá conectar esta questão à ideia do mal a permear o tempo, que está tão presente em Dracula.

Palavras-chave: Vampiros; modernidade; ciência; medicina; tecnologia; crença; Mal.

Introduction

The well-known horror author Stephen King first read *Dracula* (1897) when he was nine or ten years old, around 1957. His mother brought it home for him from the Stratford Public Library at his request, and even though she believed the book to be in a category she called "trash", she let little Stephen read it anyway, for she knew that "[…] trash has its place" (King 1977, viii).

Bram Stoker's tale about an ancient vampire that aspires to thrive in modern society stuck with King, and being one of the first adult fiction books he read, it took him to a new level of fiction, where the use of diary entries, phonograph recordings and newspaper cuttings opened a grander array of possibilities.

King came across *Dracula* again, this time teaching a high school English class called Fantasy and Science Fiction in the early 70's. He picked it up reluctantly, in fear of spoiling the childish fervor he had built around the book and realized it was more than what he had made of it at first. The novel only became greater, for as King claims: "[…] the great ones only get bigger and cast longer shadows" (King 1977, x).

While chatting with his wife Tabitha he wondered out loud what would it have been like if instead of Victorian London the vampire had come to America in the 70's, laughing at the extrapolation. When his wife, seeing a possibility in King's idea, asked why couldn't he come to Maine (King's home state) his creative mind lit up with thousands of scenarios. So, *'Salem's Lot* (1975) came to be. The novel was first to be named *The Second Coming*, but when King's wife pointed out the resemblance to a porn title King agreed and replaced the title with the more appropriate *'Salem's Lot*, abbreviating "Jerusalem" so readers wouldn't directly relate it to religion. In fact, as

King explains in the novel, Jerusalem ('Salem) was a ferocious hog that lived in that area, until one day it broke free from the farm where it lived the place came to be known as 'Salem's Lot, as a way to caution people to beware the danger that may be lurking in the woods. The importance of this little story lies in the moral King imprints on it, that "[…] in America even a pig can aspire to immortality" (King 1975, 23).

This novel is much more than just a mere retelling of *Dracula* in a contemporary setting, it is a work that speaks to the readers about the way Evil can spread across a land, reaping humanity away, it just so happened that King saw in the vampire the perfect villain to demonstrate this, allowing the writer to incorporate other characteristics he found relevant, as will be further on analyzed.

Although the tagline "Once bitten, twice damned" reveals the theme of the book, we first get the feeling that it is about a haunted house, the Marsten House, or what King labels in *Danse Macabre* (1981) as the "Bad Place" (296). This happens because Doubleday's Bill Thompson suggested that King should keep the reader in the dark in the beginning, to provide some suspense, to what King replied that anyone who read this type of fiction would immediately know it was vampires from the start, Thompson then said to King that he was now aiming for a bigger crowd, composed of very different ages, who read or heard about *Carrie* (1974), which was a big success, and wished to get to know better this promising new author.

In this "Bad Place" (King 1981, 296) the protagonist Ben Mears, a writer like a lot of King's protagonists, has a traumatic encounter with the ghost of its deceased owner, Hubert Marsten. The novel definitely feels like haunted house fiction, but King would leave the theme of the haunted house for his next publication, *The Shining* (1977). Vampires are the real fiend in this book, bloodthirsty and creepy vampires, pre-dating those created by Anne Rice in *Interview With the Vampire* (1976), a novel that popularized the trend of romanticized and charming vampires that is being revitalized today and is being met with mixed reactions.

Before Rice's masterpiece of passion; loneliness; betrayal and hunger, vampires were either scary or campy, and King's vampires are most definitely terrifying, even if occasionally alluring with a malicious purpose. King's creatures are closer to Stoker's Dracula than the kind and reluctant Louis or even the arrogant and vicious Lestat, they are more beastly, more primal and less charismatic. This came about because King also incorporated in the novel his memories of EC Comics such as *Tales From the Crypt* and *Tales From the Vault*, both dating back to the 50's. These were the comics he loved as a

youngster, even though they also bared the stamp of "trash" bestowed by King's mother. Young Stephen loved them, chiefly because they showed *American* vampires, who drove cars, owned restaurants and went on dates (King 1981, x), they made the best of what modernity had to offer, differing from the old fashion Count Dracula, for whom modernity, although very alluring, turned out to be a nemesis. As a result of their inspiration King came up with his own breed of vampires, as he describes in the introduction of '*Salem's Lot*, "[…] cruder than Stoker's count and more physically monstrous. These were pale, paranoid nightmares with gigantic fangs and fleshy red lips. They did not sip delicately, as Count Dracula sipped at the ever-more-wasted veins of Lucy Westenra" (ix).

This re-inventing of the vampire by King was well accepted throughout the world. The book sold millions of copies in various editions, won literary awards and was even nominated for the 2012's *Bram Stoker Vampire Novel of the Century Award*, losing to *I Am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson.

Then again this was only possible, first and foremost, thanks to the creative mind of Bram Stoker, his creature is brilliant because it has the capacity to expand in a way that speaks universally to a grander array of issues than just those of the Victorian ages where it was framed by its author. And living in a post-Vietnam America, King found in the vampire, in his own words, "[…] a metaphor for everything that was wrong with society around me" (1981, xi). And what better creature than the vampire to incorporate all those fears and worries? For as Salomon argues in *Mazes of the Serpent* (2002) vampires are "the most potent figurations of ghostly apparition. They register not the finality of death […] but its continuing presence" (67), they are thus able to successfully permeate time and space at the will of a creative mind and a skilled pen.

1. The Role of Science, Medicine and Technology in Both Novels

> "[…] the invention of electric light, which had killed the shadows in men's minds much more effectively than a stake through a vampire's heart – and less messily, too. The evil still went on, but now it went on in the hard, soulless glare of parking-lot fluorescents, of neon tubing, of hundred-watt bulbs by the billions"
>
> (King 1977, 348)

Analyzing now the role of science, medicine and technology in the development of both plots we can observe how *Dracula* reflects the transformations of Victorian England, and how the Count himself embodies the fears of that period, the fear of the

advances of technology, he who has persisted for so long and depends on the old lore to carry on.

Among the transformations are the rise of the newly professional woman, represented by Mina Murray, Jonathan Harker's sweetheart and leading lady in the novel; and particularly the obsession with technologic novelties. Proof is Mina's newfangled typewriting machine; Dr. Seward's phonograph; the telegraph; among other resources, never forgetting electricity. These were ways for technology to help the "Fearless Vampire Hunters" (as King calls them in *Danse Macabre*) (41) defeat Dracula.

As for the Count himself, he read a lot of newspapers and was up to date with the newest technologies and laws practiced far away from his castle, as he claims "I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is" (Stoker 2000, 17). He saw in that city an opportunity, not only to participate, but to proliferate amongst the effervescent crowd. Unfortunately for him what compelled him was the same that contributed greatly for his demise, for it was with the aid of science that the hunters were able to finally catch up with the supernatural being. Stoker thus attributes to science a vital role in the struggle between good (represented as the sophisticated present) and evil (represented as the primordial past).

But innovation alone could not defeat the creature, as Dr. Abraham Van Helsing knew so well. In the scene where he presents garlic flowers for Lucy to hang on her window and around her neck as "treatment", or better yet prevention, he is called a jester, to which Van Helsing replies "[…] there is grim purpose in all I do" (Stoker 2000, 112). Medicine works as a scapegoat for the incredulity in the folklore. Dr. John Seward believes Lucy died of "[…] nervous prostration following on great loss or waste of blood" (Stoker 2000, 163). But where did her blood go?

The new ways alone were getting in the way of reality, explaining their problems away, as Van Helsing utters "Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain" (Stoker 2000, 163). Only this wise character, joining his scientific knowledge with his open-mind towards non-Western folk remedies, can grasp the reality of the situation, adding religious artifacts, like crosses and communion wafers to their efforts. This need to combine the two becomes more and more evident as the plot develops, for as Jonathan Harker points out:

"[…] unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere 'modernity' cannot kill" (Stoker 2000, 164).

> In a way it is up to Van Helsing to make the others believe in what they are really up against. He has a particularly difficult task with Dr. Seward, a science man at heart, representing all of those who lean on science at all times, blindly expecting it to have all the answers. To persuade him Van Helsing says "[…] there are things done to-day in electrical science which would have been deemed unholy by the very men who discovered electricity – who would themselves not so long before have been burned as wizards. There are always mysteries in life" (Stoker 2000, 164).

In *Dracula* the modern breakthroughs might have worked as an aid to the vampire hunters, but in *'Salem's Lot* the vampires take full advantage of all they can to hide and escape from the hunters.

Here again we see science getting in the way of believing, but in an even stronger way, for the advancements in areas like medicine prevent considering the occult. For example, when Danny Glick was bitten and began presenting the same symptoms as Lucy, he was tested for many things at the hospital and nobody knew what was wrong with him. He was later released with the diagnosis of pernicious anemia (a.k.a. Addison-Biermer anemia) and the recommendation for daily doses of vitamin B12. Soon after that he died. And like Lucy, Danny looked lively in death, rationally negating the possibility of ill-treatment. Hence "[…] under the rational lights of electric bulbs" (King 1977, 235) King's characters blind themselves with coherent thought, much like Dr. Seward before them, forcing themselves to believe that they live in a reality where blood loss symptoms are easily justified with anemia and bad reactions to garlic are nothing but allergies (King 1977, 374).

2. Believing the Unbelievable

> "I think it's relatively easy for people to accept something like telepathy or precognition or teleplasm because their willingness to believe doesn't cost them anything. It doesn't keep them awake nights. But the idea that the evil that men do lives after them is more unsettling"
> (King 1977, 136)

As skeptic as the characters might be, clear evidence of facts and the built-up of frightening situations make them confront their belief system and consider things they did not think possible. In *Dracula* this is perhaps most noticeable with Harker, who representing the modern man mirrors Victorian English society's concerns and doubts.

The Romanian people's superstitions and subservience to an unknown power contrasts with the skepticism of Harker, who is clueless about their obvious warnings. It is only when he starts seeing more and more strange things that he starts believing those

who warned him about the great evil in that land, ultimately finding the crucifix that was given to him to be very useful against the Count.

The group (especially Dr. Seward) must see things with their own eyes to believe. Van Helsing might have made Dr. Seward agree that some years ago his techniques were considered witchcraft, but it was only when he saw Lucy's aspect when dead; her elongated and sharp canines; her rise from the grave and ultimately her vampire-like behavior that he truly believed. In the end we learn that science and faith must complement each other in the fight against evil, a lesson that King's skeptic characters had to learn as well, and as fast as they could.

For *'Salem's Lot* the same applies, seeing is believing, and as Matt Burke can testify, seeing these creatures in action can actually give you a heart attack.

The incredulity and skepticism here are a lot stronger, so belief can only come with irrefutable evidence, like seeing it with one's own eyes.

In this novel the belief of a child (epitomized by Mark Petrie) is contrasted with the firm disbelief of adults. Mark's convictions are unshaken, as we witness in the scene where Danny visits him, he is only able to conquer the newly turned vampire-child because of his knowledge of monsters, acquired through horror magazines and Hammer films. He knows that vampires can't come in his house unless they're invited, he knows about their strengths and weaknesses.

Today we see this in practically every horror movie, it's adults who must break through their skepticism, while usually children understand what is happening pretty early in the plot. As King competently illustrates:

> There is no group therapy or psychiatry or community social services for the child who must cope with the thing under the bed or in the cellar every night, the thing which leers and capers and threatens just beyond the point where vision will reach. The same lonely battle must be fought night after night and the only cure is the eventual ossification of the imaginary faculties, and this is called adulthood. (King 1977, 279)

Ultimately the adult characters who survive the longest are the ones who come to believe in the existence of Evil and also in the folklore cures and preventions.

Not only belief in the supernatural Evil is important, but also religious faith plays a crucial role in the novel. Mark repels vampire Danny with a plastic cross ripped from a toy, but Father Callahan is not able to achieve the same results although using a real crucifix, for ironically, his faith is not solid like Mark's.

The same does not occur in *Dracula*. The crucifix in Stoker's novel has an inherent power even if it just hangs from a wall. But when King wrote *'Salem's Lot* a pragmatic perspective of the world was more usual, so it came to be that the faith of the person holding the cross is actually what determines its effect, simply presenting it just won't do it for King's creatures, without belief it becomes just an inanimate object. We can therefore determine that Dracula and Barlow (the chief vampire in *'Salem's Lot*) although sharing an aversion to religious paraphernalia respond to it in a slightly different way, whereas Dracula cannot bring himself to touch a cross, for Barlow it is all about the person holding it.

Father Callahan had turned to his religion only to discover his convictions were not strong enough, so Barlow calls him a "false priest" (King 1977, 403) and subdues him saying: "The cross… the bread and wine… the confessional… only symbols. Without faith, the cross is only wood, the bread baked wheat, the wine sour grapes" (King 1977, 403). Father Callahan's loss of faith mirrors the way society has come to understand evil as an environmental problem rather than a spiritual one.

Towards the end of the novel the townsmen started instinctively to protect themselves without admitting or speculating out loud what they were protecting themselves against, as King explains:

> None of those awake in 'Salem's Lot knew the truth. A handful might have suspected, but even their suspicions were as vague and unformed as three-month fetuses. Yet they had gone unhesitatingly to bureau drawers, attic boxes, or bedroom jewel collections to find whatever religious hex symbols they might possess. They did this without thinking, the way a man driving a long distance alone will sing without knowing he sings. (King 1977, 424)

Having a lot to do with the reaction of the townspeople is the fact that this is a post-Vietnam novel, so people recognized horror, for "[i]n those days, coming awake had been as sudden as the snapping of fingers or the clicking on of a lamp; one minute you were a stone, the next you were awake in the dark" (King 1977, 425). After seeing so much violence and mangled bodies one would just become numb and robotic.

Some of the emotions, fears, reactions and even sights were very familiar to those who wave either lived the war or seen it thought the media, as it is noticed by Ben that "The shapes of the bodies under the cover were undeniable and unmistakable, making him think of new photos from Vietnam – battlefield dead and soldiers carrying dreadful burdens in black rubber sacks that looked absurdly like golf bags" (King 1977, 434). The Vietnam War was a war that came home with the survivors and left deep thick scars, as Martin Luther King stated in a speech (1967): "The bombs in Vietnam explode

at home", attesting that horror is not always far away, it can also come to a little town like Jerusalem's Lot.

3. Evil Permeating Time and Space

Focusing now on the way Evil permeates time and space, an idea so present in both of these novels, for we know of the Count's lineage as a descendant of Attila the Hun (in a category of evil all by himself) and we are also aware of Barlow's age in the moment he confesses to had passed "centuries as [Ben had] passed hours before a fireplace with a book" (King 1977, 465). We can then ask ourselves *what* attracted the creatures, the Evil to each place?

What allured Dracula to London was most definitely the modernity of the city. London represented to him a way to link his ancient Evil with the modern world. So much so, that when Dracula came to London he went by the name Count De Ville (Stoker 2000, 234). Pushing aside the obvious play with the word *devil*, one can infer that the surname De Ville implies subliminally that the Evil he now represents comes *from* the city itself, as it has called upon him.

Harker eventually realizes who or better yet, *what*, he was helping to move to "his" London. So he writes on his journal "This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless" (Stoker 2000, 44).

As Stephen D. Arata argues, "[w]hile Gothic novelists had traditionally displaced their stories in time or locale", take for example Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) or Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), "[…] Stoker's novel achieves its effects by bringing the terror of the Gothic home" (621). King did the exact same thing with his vampire Barlow, bringing this foul Evil to America's back yard instead of presenting it in a faraway castle or gothic location.

Furthermore Arata claims that *Dracula* is a "narrative of reverse colonization" (1990, 623), stating that the vampire represents England's fear of the Other, the foreigner. As he puts it: "[…] a terrifying reversal has occurred: the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized" (Arata 1990, 623). Renfield could then symbolize the British Empire, feeding on smaller animals, progressing from flies to spiders to sparrows until he ends up asking for a cat, never fully satisfied. Van Helsing (the Dutch) and Morris (the American)

would then represent then the British allies. So, according to Arata's train of thought it can be said that *Dracula* mirrors the concerns surrounding the decline of the British Empire.

We can say that in *Dracula* the city is the protagonist, the Count being the antagonist, and London ultimately ends up sending him back to where he came from.

4. Inviting Evil In

In *'Salem's Lot* case, what attracted Barlow is first presented in a subtle way. In the first hundred or so pages the novel seems more concerned with growing friendships, love affairs and town gossip than with presenting the vampires, this is because the main character in this novel is the town of Jerusalem's Lot itself, and King's character development is as accurate and relevant as always. He shows us the town's petty evils of triviality and futility that attracted a much greater Evil, with a capital E, private and personified, which fed on the townspeople, both metaphorically and literally.

In the interludes called "The Lot" King addresses the daily life of the town, and describes skillfully the way it chokes immersed in Evil. Even though Jerusalem's Lot doesn't have the anonymity of London, where even a foreigner like Dracula goes unnoticed, for it is a much more intimate place where everybody knows one another, it was still their sins that attracted Evil.

It was not by chance that King's main vampire chose the Marsten House, a house filled with violent memories. It is hinted that the one that told Barlow about the town was Hubert Marsten himself. Barlow clarifies:

> So I have come here, to a town which was first told of to me by a most brilliant man, a former townsman himself, now lamentably deceased. The folk here are still rich and full-blooded, folk who are stuffed with the aggression and darkness so necessary to… there is no English for it. Pokol; vurderlak; eyalik. Do you follow?. (King 1977, 272)

The use of these words might suggest that Barlow also hails from Eastern Europe, for Harker hears a similar array of words at the beginning of his ride to Dracula's castle, which included "pokol", meaning "hell" (Stoker 2000, 5).

The symbol of Marster's evil is the house he died in, the house that soaked his Evil and became the perfect haven for a beast like Barlow. About the importance of the Marsten House King writes: "I think that house might be Hubert Marsten's monument to evil, a kind of psychic sounding board. A supernatural beacon, if you like. Sitting

there all these years, maybe holding the essence of Hubie's evil in its old, moldering bones" (King 1977, 136). The Marsten House and its intrinsic evil were inspired chiefly by Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), which King greatly admires, and an experience King had with a spooky house when he was younger that engraved a lasting memory on his mind.

King's *'Salem's Lot* was also inspired by Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place* (1956), a novel where petty people try desperately to keep their skeletons in the closet. He shows us a town diseased and already cursed by the sins of its habitants, which with the arrival of Barlow grew less and less human. The Lot aspired to be the perfect astray place for a vampire-filled land. And linking this back to Dracula, as Arata claims, the moral and spiritual decline of a nation (or for the purpose, town) makes it vulnerable to the attacks of more vigorous primal people (1990, 623). These fears might relate to cultural guilt, in *Dracula* relating it to the British colonies and in *'Salem's Lot* relating it to the Vietnam War.

Pretty much everywhere in civilized world today we see small towns crushed under the weight of modernity, with more and more people moving out, attracted as well by the city's bright lights and opportunities, therefore a story about a town that gets dried out by Evil is as pertinent today as it way when King wrote it in 1975.

In conclusion, comparing *'Salem's Lot* to *Dracula* we can consequently claim that not only was King able to competently invert the role of science, medicine and technology reinforcing the resistance to fully embrace the existence of the supernatural, but he has successfully imprinted in the vampire the horrors of the Vietnam War.

By taking the myth to a darker place and giving it more aggressive features, King molded these vampires to serve the purpose of incarnating an Evil that terrified the United States in the 70's, and this was a palpable evil, one you could drive a stake through, if you were brave (and savvy) enough.

King also displayed the whole of Jerusalem's Lot as they languished and were summoned one by one to the army of darkness. This strong statement goes astray from the subtle way London was affected by Count Dracula. With this novel King was able to crystallize the essence of the vampire, a creature that acts without worries or regrets.

In his short essay entitled "Suck on This", an intro to the *American Vampire* comics, Stephen King replies to the question "What should vampires be?", his answer is: "Killers, honey. Stone killers who never get enough of that tasty Type-A. Bad boys and

girls. Hunters. In other words, Midnight America. Red white and blue, accent on the red. Those vamps got hijacked by a lot of soft-focus romance" (King 2010, 1).

Stephen King will continue to, as he states, give "back the teeth that the current "sweetie-vamp" craze has, by and large, stolen from the bloodsuckers. It's about making them *scary* again" (King 2010, 3). And as long as there are writers who like King sustain the true nature of Count Dracula, Stoker's creation will permeate trough time and space for years and years to come.

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