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Analiza protagonista u pripovijetki „Vampir“ Johna Williama Polidorija

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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Abstract

John William Polidori can be considered the father of the modern vampire. The legend itself lived long before Polidori, but he created the character that would change the way readers of Gothic fiction perceived the vampire. This paper will focus on the vampire protagonist of John Polidori's short story "The Vampyre". It will research how the story fits into the frames of Gothic fiction. Then it will briefly discuss the long history of vampire characters in mythologies, with a special accent on Croatian legends. The main part will focus on the description of Lord Ruthven and his characteristics. To further deepen the analysis of the character, the paper will research Lord Ruthven's victims and try to understand his motifs for destruction. The last part of the paper will summarize all major points of the characterization and conclude why this character has influenced such a radical change in the perception of vampires in general.

Keywords: vampire, Lord Ruthven, John Polidori, Gothic fiction.

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Introduction

Legends about vampires are very likely as old as humanity itself. They were used to explain natural occurrences and sicknesses when modern science and medicine were non-existent. The most fascinating fact about vampires is that they are truly immortal, at least in literature. John Polidori's short story contributed greatly to the evolution of the literary vampire, which became one of the staple characters of Gothic genre. The main purpose of this paper is to explore the importance of the vampire character as it was represented by John Polidori. It will examine the greatness of the character's sins and crimes – turning the virtuous into sinful and killing the innocent. The paper will also show that this story can be interpreted in more than one way.

The first chapter will deal with the story's Gothic features such as time, place and atmosphere of the story. The second chapter will explore the legends that feature a vampire character. To be precise, it will present a vampire character from a seventeenth-century Croatian legend. The third chapter will focus on the information about Lord Ruthven (his appearance, personality and habits) available in the short story. Further on, it will analyse Lord Ruthven's victims and the significance of his attacks in order to characterize him. The paper will then end with a conclusion of the main points about the protagonist and his effect on the future representations of vampires in Gothic literature.

1. Elements of Gothic fiction in “The Vampyre”

In the timeline of literary periods, the succeeding periods typically oppose one another. While the period of Enlightenment was focused on objectivity, reason, and scientific approach to literature, Romanticism focused on the individual, valued emotions over reason, and relied on imagination. Gothic literature developed as a part of Romanticism. It was in radical opposition to the Enlightenment ideals of order, decorum, and rational control, and concerned itself with themes such as otherness, terror, and violence (“The Romantic Period” 6). The first seminal work of Gothic fiction is Horace Walpole’s novel *The Castle of Otranto* published in 1764 (“The Romantic Period” 19). The novel served as an example for further Gothic writing and had set some of the key elements of Gothic fiction.

The basic Gothic features are time and place of the story. The plot is usually placed in historical, old buildings, and castles full of history. They are secluded form the rest of the world and filled with mystery and unknown. They are filled with darkness, which brings more suspense to the story (Harris). John Polidori’s “The Vampyre” is set in multiple locations. First, the reader meets the characters in London among aristocratic social gatherings. It is winter at the start of the plot, which means that the days are shorter, darker, and colder. The parties were organised by noblemen so despite the fact that the setting is in London, it is connected to some kind of tradition and history. Other settings mentioned in the story are the cities of Brussels, Rome, and Athens. Each is an important city with great history. However, Lord Ruthven does not show his worst form in any of the mentioned cities. The setting where the culmination of events occurs is a dark forest “when they heard the name of the place, they all at once begged of him not to return at night, as he must necessarily pass through a wood, where no Greek would ever remain, after the day had closed, upon any consideration” (Polidori 7). The scariness of the forest is further emphasised by the storm. Aubrey, one of the main protagonists, is in the dark, only able to hear thunder and, at moments, woman’s screams.

The darkness of the forest, the unknown, and the storm contributed to the atmosphere of mystery and suspense, which is another element of Gothic literature. The story is usually filled with a threatening feeling, mystery, and fear which is enchanted by the unknown (Harris). From the beginning of the story, the reader knows that Lord Ruthven is a character that poses a threat to the society, but until the very end he/she does not know what he will do. He is described as a cold, distant person but with an aura that captivates people and makes him desirable in social gatherings. His mystery attracts people as if by magic. The suspense in the reader is amplified by the fact that the narrator does not confirm or deny Lord Ruthven's true nature.

In "The Vampyre", there are both a prophecy and a curse that Aubrey should be mindful of, but which he foolishly dismisses. Ianthe, the Greek girl with whom Aubrey falls in love, warns him of the legend of the living vampire. When he laughs it off, she warns him of a prophecy: "she begged him to believe her, for it had been, remarked, that those who had dared to question their existence, always had some proof given, which obliged them, with grief and heartbreaking, to confess it was true" (Polidori 6). This prophecy is a foreshadowing of events that will happen later on in the story. Lord Ruthven's charity work was a disguise for a curse, or a kind of a Faustian trade with the devil. Whenever a beggar would come to him, Lord Ruthven would give him what he wanted but the consequences were terrible: "all those upon whom it was bestowed, inevitably found that there was a curse upon it, for they were all either led to the scaffold, or sunk to the lowest and the most abject misery" (Polidori 3). Another important curse/oath is the one Aubrey makes to Lord Ruthven on Lord Ruthven's alleged deathbed. Lord Ruthven makes Aubrey swear "by all your soul reveres, by all your nature fears, swear that, for a year and a day you will not impart your knowledge of my crimes or death to any living being in any way, whatever may happen, or whatever you may see" (Polidori 10). When Aubrey returns to England and sees Lord Ruthven alive, his oath haunts him and makes

him go crazy. Any time he would even think of breaking the promise, Lord Ruthven's voice reminds him of his oath.

Supernatural and inexplicable events occur unobtrusively, and when they do, Aubrey dismisses them and tries to find a logical explanation. Although he was suspecting that something was not right, he refused to believe the truth. For example, when Lord Ruthven's body disappears from the summit where the robbers placed it, Aubrey convinces himself that they stole the clothes and buried the body. All of those elements are typical for Gothic fiction, along with the typical victims of Gothic genre. Usually, they are women in distress threatened by a powerful male (Harris). The importance of the victims and Lord Ruthven's nature will be discussed further on in the paper.

2. Lord Ruthven and the mythological vampire

John Polidori (1795 – 1821), who was the personal physician of Lord George Gordon Byron, is a writer marginalized by most literary anthologies. Nevertheless, he left a great impact on the Gothic and the vampire genre in general. The idea of a bloodsucking undead person was not originally his, but he shaped it in his short story "The Vampyre" in a way that would leave a permanent mark on literature: "The publication of Polidori's 'The Vampyre' could be said to mark the decisive move away from the folkloric vampire, away from the shuffling, mindless peasant of legend, and to establish the basic form of the literary vampire" (Punter and Byron 157). The idea for the story was provided by Byron himself in a fragmentary story written on Lake Geneva, on the same night that produced Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. The name for the vampire character in "The Vampyre" came from a novel by Lady Caroline Lamb, *Glenarvon* (1816). Its central character, Clarence de Ruthven, was based on Lamb's previous lover, Lord Byron himself (Punter and Byron 157).

Another very important source for Lord Ruthven's character is vampire as described in the legends and folk stories. Vampire legends can be found in all parts of the world. Aubrey, the protagonist, finds out about a Greek legend from Ianthe. However, the vampires in those folklore stories have more in common with an animal than with an aristocrat. Beliefs and tales of the dead coming back to the world of the living have existed for a very long time. As Matthew Beresford argues "the history of the modern vampire myth can be traced back through time some 6000 years to the Classical World of Ancient Greece and Rome" (1). For example, there is written evidence of many supernatural and scary creatures typical for Gothic genre in Croatian history. One of them is the legend of a vampire called Jure Grando from Kringa, a small village in Istria. It is recorded that in the seventeenth century Jure was terrorizing his village after his death. He would knock on people's doors and those who live in that particular house could expect someone to die in the near future. Allegedly, Jure was even sexually active.

He would go to his widow's house and rape her. To get rid of him, the villagers exhumed his body and cut off his head. Jure screamed as if he was alive and his grave was filled with blood. After that, the village became peaceful again. The story was described by Johann Weichard von Valvasor (Baresin 9-10). Such vampire legends had many different purposes. As people did not know much about science and medicine, through stories about creatures like Jure, they explained many natural occurrences and sicknesses. The eighteenth century Croatian writer, Adam Krčelić, in his *Annue,* writes about the vampire from the village Patak and, according to Čoralić et al., emphasises the vampire-like sexuality rather than the deadly consequences of vampire attacks:

> He stated that vampires *mingle with women and perform sexual acts*. In accordance with that, the vampire of Patak came to his widow and performed sexual acts with her and that he did so, as Krčelić said, *with more strength than he did while he was alive*, which certainly confirms the connection, even now present and inseparable, between vampires and sex. (Čoralić et al. 63)

Legends and myths about similar vampire creatures exist in many different countries, such as Serbia[1] and Romania, with different variations.

Although he is the first of his kind, a few characteristics connect Lord Ruthven to the vampire of the folklore myths. The first similarity is the fact that he needs to drink blood to stay alive. Lord Ruthven brought destruction and death wherever he came as did the animalistic vampires of the myths. The second connection to the legends is the importance of moonlight. Lord Ruthven did not seem to have any problems with daylight and sun, but the moonlight played an important part in his resurrection: "[Ruthven's body] should be exposed to the first cold ray of the moon that rose after his death" (Polidori 11). Vampires, much like other

[1] See: Jovanović (2016).

supernatural creatures of the folklore legends such as witches and werewolves, also had a strange relationship with the moonlight. As Megan Stebbis wrote, even the inanimate objects could become vampires if left exposed to the moonlight. The same power of the moonlight Lord Ruthven used to bring himself back to life. Moreover, his strange, pale face and great strength are common to the vampires of the legends with the difference that Lord Ruthven was beautiful.[2] Vampires from the legends always had some characteristics in their appearance that would separate them from the living (Stebbins).

The biggest difference between Lord Ruthven and the vampire of the past is that Lord Ruthven is of noble birth, while the traditional ones were commoners and peasants (Stebbins). This shift in classes opens up the possibilities for political readings of the vampire genre (Punter and Byron 269; Lukić and Matek 88-89) which is perhaps Polidori's biggest achievement; Lord Ruthven was detached form animalistic forms connected to vampires (Stebbins). Ruthven did use his teeth to kill Ianthe, but the author never mentions fangs, which are a prominent feature of vampires in modern day stories.

[2] Lukić and Matek discuss the issues of humanizing and beautifying vampires in their essay "Bella and the Beast: When Vampires Fall in Love, or the Twilight of a Genre" (80-92).

3. Characterization of Lord Ruthven

3.1. Ruthven in the short story

The story begins with a description of Lord Ruthven's most important traits. He is not of a high rank but has an appeal which intrigues the rich: "His peculiarities caused him to be invited to every house; all wished to see him" (Polidori 1). The writer does not describe his outer appearance in detail but rather keeps it general. The traits that he does emphasise are his eyes, skin and beauty. His eyes were dead grey, his skin was pale and never changing colour (never blushing) but still his face was attractive "its form and outline were beautiful" (Polidori 1). His eyes are an important characteristic of his character. With one glance he was capable of piercing "through to the inward workings of the heart" (Polidori 1). His characteristics and his aura made him attractive to many upper-class women, but he was quite specific with what he wanted. Lady Mercer, who was known as a "common adultress", could not keep Lord Ruthven's attention but he was not indifferent to female sex. Although he hid it very well, he liked to speak to and win over virtuous wives and innocent daughters. He had a "reputation of winning tongue" (Polidori 1) and he liked to surround himself with both "females who form the boast of their sex from their domestic virtues, as among those who sully it by their vices" (Polidori 1).

Whereas the reader learns all this from the narrator, the rest of the story is told from Aubrey's point of view. Aubrey was a young rich nobleman who, alongside his sister, was an orphan. He was left to the guardians who cared only about their money, neglecting Aubrey's growth as a person. Without proper guidance, Aubrey developed his imagination more than his judgement. He was naïve, and full of romantic ideas of honour and candour: "he thought, in short, that the dreams of poets were realities of life" (Polidori 2). Aubrey was intrigued by Lord Ruthven's character because of the façade that he had. He could not interpret his inexistent emotions so he created an image of Lord Ruthven as some kind of "romantic hero". He is

captivated by Lord Ruthven's aura of strangeness and mysticism that he could not see him in a proper light. The two of them set off to a journey together and through that journey, the reader learns more about Lord Ruthven's strange actions and behaviours.

Very early on in their journey, Aubrey discovers that the romantic image of Lord Ruthven that he had created is false. Lord Ruthven appeared to be of a generous hand at first, but Aubrey notices that he "helped" the less fortunate with "hardly suppressed sneers" (Polidori 3). It seemed that his charity had a curse upon it which ruined the beggars: "all those upon whom it was bestowed, inevitably found that there was a curse upon it, for they were either led to the scaffold, or sunk to the lowest and the most abject misery" (Polidori 3). Lord Ruthven was always drawn to the centre of vices in every town they visited. He was especially drawn to the gambling table. He would win games and take the money from those who were poor and in desperate situations, and would lose even more money to those already rich and corrupted.

The breaking point in Lord Ruthven's and Aubrey's relationship came with time. By getting to know him better through their journey, Aubrey realized that there was nothing romantic about Lord Ruthven. His doubts were confirmed when he received the letter from his guardians. The letter said that all of the women with whom Lord Ruthven became closer have lost their virtuous behaviour and have succumbed to the vices of the world. Aubrey was determined to keep an eye on Lord Ruthven while they were in Rome. When he realized that Ruthven was seducing a young girl, he confronted him and asked him what his plans with her were. Lord Ruthven responded ambiguously "that his intentions were such as he supposed all would have upon such an occasion" (Polidori 5).

3.2. Lord Ruthven's victims

Lord Ruthven victims were diverse. Although the first victims that come to mind are the ones physically hurt, he was a hurricane in more than one way. It seems that anybody who came

into contact with him deteriorated or died. According to Ianthe's legend, "vampyres" such as Ruthven, had to drink blood of innocent women to survive. However, Lord Ruthven was not just an animalistic being who killed to survive. He was a sophisticated killer who knew what he was doing. The choice of his victims and how he brought harm to them helps in understanding the character of Lord Ruthven and what he represents.

There are several categories in which Lord Ruthven's victims can be placed according to the way they were destructed. Firstly, there are previously mentioned "the idle, the vagabond and the beggar" which were destroyed by the cursed charity that Lord Ruthven would give them. This mysterious deterioration of people who come into contact with Lord Ruthven brings mystery into the story, and doubt and fear into Aubrey. A similar instance is when the poor sit at the gambling table with Lord Ruthven, which opens up the possibility to interpret Ruthven as an allegory for capitalism that was starting to win over England and the world in general. With the laissez-faire policy, the market went unregulated and the rich became richer on the account of the poor, overworked labourers: "suffering was largely confined to the poor, however, for all this while the landed classes, the industrialists, and many of the merchants prospered" ("The Romantic Period" 4). Ruthven, much like the economy of the time, was skilled in taking money from "the luckless father of a numerous family" but would lose "to the ruiner of many" (Polidori 3,4).

Ianthe and Miss Aubrey belong to the category of innocent murdered women. Polidori did not use the now familiar trope of a victim being transformed into a vampire through a bite (Bainbridge 26). They were used to glut his thirst and killed. However, it could be argued that Lord Ruthven used the women's deaths as a weapon against Aubrey, since Aubrey cared for both of them very deeply. Miss Aubrey was his sister, and Ianthe became a permanent occupation of his thoughts. Both of them were uncorrupted and genuinely good people.

Then, there are the young women in London and other cities whom he seduced and "corrupted" but did not kill. Lord Ruthven made an art out of his life necessities. His strange appearance and attractive aura got him invited to his victim's home and enabled him to choose. The young women whom he chose were beautiful, virtuous and uncorrupted girls, and faithful wives. Polidori made it seem that Ruthven's crimes with these women were of a sexual nature. Namely, their interaction corrupted those women in such a way that they stopped caring about the norms and were "hurled from the pinnacle of unsullied virtue, down to the lowest abyss of infamy and degradation" (Polidori 4). He managed to seduce all those women thanks to his beauty and his "golden tongue". Looking from a point of view of an aristocrat living in those times, such crime was horrendous. The upper class society had harsh moral guidelines and rules dividing what is right from wrong ("The Romantic Period" 13). In addition to that, women were considered "as inferior to men in intellect and in all but domestic talents" ("The Romantic Period" 4). They were provided limited schooling and were "subjected to a rigid code of sexual behaviour, and possessed almost no legal rights" ("The Romantic Period" 4). That is why the weight of that sin is so great even though the author never explicitly says what happened between those women and Lord Ruthven. It just states that they have thrown away their masks and broke social norms of proper conduct. This shows that Lord Ruthven's power is not only his physical strength, but also the strength to defy the society's norms and bring change and new standards. He liberated the women from all the social restrains and gave them courage to be who they were meant to be, regardless of the strict social norms. This calls for an interpretation of the vampire character as a symbol for the dangers of unrestrained sexuality, which also explains why he did not enjoy the company of women such as Lady Mercer, who were already liberal with their sexuality. Although everybody judged her, Lady Mercer was not oppressed by rigid moral codes. This character trait will be embraced by the Victorians,

especially Bram Stoker, whose novel *Dracula* tackles the topic of sexual liberation of women, among other relevant social issues of the time.

The fact that Lord Ruthven loves challenges is additionally affirmed during their stay in Italy. As the author said, “In Italy, it is seldom that an unmarried female is met with in society” (Polidori 4). That meant that Lord Ruthven had to have secret meetings with her, but he was still persistent and managed to conduct his plan. His “conquest” was interfered by Aubrey when he informed the girl’s parents of Lord Ruthven’s nature. Still, the young Italian girl shared the fate of all the rest of them. The seduction of Miss Aubrey can be seen as a revenge to Aubrey for his interference.

Aubrey himself belongs to the last category of victims. In fact, he can be considered the greatest victim of Lord Ruthven’s destructiveness. Aubrey is attributed some of the typical female characteristics which can be seen as a strong message to men of the time. With the lack of education and critical scrutiny, the only thing he develops is his imagination, a trait which is usually attributed to female heroines. He is drawn to Lord Ruthven and his strangeness as strongly as the women are. However, Lord Ruthven did not destroy him the same way he did his other victims because he was different: he was an upper class man and he should have been much better educated. He strategically destroyed Aubrey first by disappointing him, then by killing his love interest and finally, by making him lose his mind. By making him keep his oath and preventing him from protecting his sister from certain death, Lord Ruthven manages to kill Aubrey without even touching him as he makes it clear that he is not man enough. In fact, Aubrey occupies the role of a heroine in traditional Gothic fiction (Bainbridge 27). Their relationship can be interpreted as Byron’s relationship towards the readers of his works: “in 'The Vampyre' John Polidori uses the trope of vampirism to figure the perceived threat of the Byronic text to its readers, a threat to which women readers were seen to be particularly

vulnerable" (Bainbridge 22). As previously said, Aubrey had the traits that were usually ascribed to females in general, with their imagination stronger than their intellect.

4. Conclusion

John Polidori's short story "The Vampyre" truly enabled the evolution of the vampire character from a bloodthirsty beast into high-class nobleman who became an allegory for difficult political and social problems. Lord Ruthven can be characterized as a persistent and powerful vampire with the knowledge about society that was far beyond his own time. He can be seen as a disease, allegory for capitalism, or as a liberator of women. Polidori kept some traditional vampire elements in Lord Ruthven's character, such as strength, his destructive force, connection to the moonlight, need for blood and immortality. However, by making him kill and destroy innocent women instead of random victims, he gave future writers a tool to point out social injustice through a character. Vampire's connection to sexuality is not unusual, but knowing the social norms and restrictions for women of the time, his crimes of sexually liberating virtuous women becomes greater. As a first appearance in English fiction of a vampire, it does not surprise that this short, but complex story inspired many stage versions, which popularized the genre among illiterate audience.

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