

Louis' Journey to Reason: A New Age Analysis of Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire (1976)

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ABSTRACT: *The primal focus of this paper is to discuss Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire (1976) as a New Age novel. In so doing, I illustrate that Rice's novel bears a universal theme of humanity being subject to an endless encounter with what Plato calls Appetite and Reason, the two faculties of the soul that shape the good and evil in the self. The paper seeks to discuss Rice's epistemology of self-transcendence as displayed in Louis; a two-hundred-year-old vampire made by Lestat. In the light of this, part of this paper will be devoted to discuss Louis as a New Age hero.*

KEYWORDS: Anne Rice, appetite, New Age, Plato, reason, vampire.

Introduction

New Age theory and Interview with the Vampire:

As a reaction against the cultural anxieties of modern Western civilization, against the nihilism and crises of meaning, against the soulless, mechanized and fragmented man, a "millennial" movement originally expanding with the

counter-culture of the late 1960's, came to orient modern Western society to spiritual consciousness (Kyle, 831). The New Age movement seeks a psychological transformation of the individual and looks to maintain order in the world as a whole (832). "Holism, interconnectedness, oneness, decentralization, and environmentalism" can be found as key terms in defining the New Age sense of wholeness and harmony with the outside world (Kyle, 832).

New Agers argues that inner spirituality, embedded in the self and the natural order as a whole, is a means to arrive at an adequate mode of being (Heelas). They maintain the integration of the whole individual, soul and body, to the external order of things. In considering such a fundamental, it is relevant to notice that New Age thought coincides with Platonic Idealism and later theories of transcendence. A Greek idealist philosopher, Plato says that the perceptible world, including our minds, partake to perfect timeless and universal patterns which he calls Ideas (Tarnas, 47).

In the main, New Agers, like in Buddhism or any other monolithic faith, argue that overcoming the body is the primary step towards any spiritualization. On the same line with these Eastern teachings, Taoist thought, from which New Age descends (Sire), focuses on the dynamic balance between intuition (Yin) and reason (Yong). Plato, similarly, does not ignore in his Republic, the importance of overcoming the three forces occurring inside the individual: Reason, which is conscious of the goal of virtue; Spirit, the will towards an action; Appetite, which manifest in physical desire. He claims, as New Agers, that in overcoming such internal dilemma, the one lives happily and gains a healthy soul. The imbalance between the two leads to evil.

New Age, like Platonism, claims that we must explore our consciousness if we are to gain an insight of the true nature of reality. It declares that justice is present in every individual, just as Plato considers mind, or "nous," as divine (Tarnas, 47). Shirley Mc Claine says that the primal spiritual law which leads to well-being is that "everyone is God" (Heelas, 2). At any rate, New Agers conclude that religion does not represent an exclusive key to spiritual enlightenment and self-realization. That is to say, the individual in New Age thought creates his own reality without necessarily believing in God.

Then, one of the New Age ideals is, first, to overcome the internal conflict between the Appetite and Reason, and second, to use knowledge in order to rise into a consciousness of wholeness which gives a sense of spirituality. One of the principle attempts of this paper is to trace New Age ideals in one of the modern vampire novels, *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). I think that vampire literature is one of the best literary representations about the nature and the state of human being today. Modern stories of vampire, like those recounted by Anne Rice or Bram Stoker, have shifted from a frightening myth to a celebration of the human and a fascination with his good deeds, possibly to teach people a model of self-renewal and self-realization. After having discussed the New Age movement and broke its thought into Platonic philosophical particles, it becomes fair now to make a humble borrow from Plato's terminology of "Appetite" and "Reason" as fixed terms in this paper.

Rice's *Interview* is a great illustration of the previously mentioned characterization of New Age standard. First, it stands as a response to the chaos that exists in contemporary humanity because of its materialism. The freedom given to vampires like Lestat leads inevitably to evil which even veils the meaning of Goodness. In this respect, this study considers first the turmoil which exists in the society of the novel, then, seeks to discuss Rice's epistemology of self-transcendence displayed by Louis, a two hundred years-old vampire made by Lestat. On the light of this, the second bulk of this paper is devoted to discuss Louis as a New Age hero. Essentially, the novel contrasts between materialists, like Lestat, who submit to the physical world and his bodily matters, and the self-conscious Louis who displays the category of reason though self-control and consciousness.

II/ The Gothic Universe of Appetite

First of all, Rice's narrative strategy in telling the story is focused in the materiality of the modern world. The interview between the vampire and the boy invokes in our mind the image of the author as a vampire and the reader as an interviewer. The fact that Louis is interviewed by a twentieth-century man, not only emphasizes vampirism as a reality, but alludes to the existence of a secular world akin to that of the vampires in Daniel's reality. In addition to that, the fact that Louis is enthusiastic to tell his story to the boy means that modern Western culture is most concerned with his teachings (Rice, 4).

It is relevant to underline that the uncomfortable setting of the novel, vampires, blood, coffins, gloomy vaults, and the omnipresent darkness, is a symptom of irrationality and diabolical machination of today's material culture. Rice seeks to highlight the devastating results of submitting to earthly matters rather than inner spiritual laws. The description of nature in New Orleans is not better than the inner soul of the people. Louis says that it is nice but desperately alive and fragile (155). This makes clear that man's nature is innocent, baring reason and justice, but is further weakened by his Appetite and greed. The strange fever that harvests people's lives in the novel metaphorically demonstrates the people's internal disease resulted from their fascination of material life. Yet, it is important to notice that the fever in the novel is one symptom of a vampire's experiencing of hunger (95). Indeed, it can be deduced that the victims of the plague represent those who fall prey to their Appetites.

As far as vampires are concerned, Rice covers the reptilian consciousness inside a human physical body mainly to represent the Appetite of individuals and the society as a whole. To be sure, scholars of psychology explain the vampire as a symbolic meaning of the unconscious side of human being (Smith). Lestat and other vampires literally suck blood to survive. Blood, therefore, becomes a motif to teach that man is seduced by a dangerous force which can alienate him from a meaningful sense of death.

In the novel, when Louis is transformed into a vampire, we are told that he became damned. In existentialist terms, he finds himself condemned into a nihilistic existence. Made and governed by Lestat, Louis's life becomes a gothic universe like that of the theatre of vampires, of the underworld, coffins and sinister houses. Correspondingly, Plato states that in order to govern adequately, rulers must recover the knowledge of the perfect Idea (qtd. in Tarnas). However, this image is literally reversed upside down in Rice's model. Lestat knows nothing about wisdom but the Devil and leads "successfully" most of his victims. Here, the image of Lestat trying to seduce Louis best figures him as the Appetite itself. Lestat teaches Louis that the better to be human, the more people he must kill, and suggests to him a different purpose for existence accordingly.

Like Appetite, Lestat is both attractive and dangerous. Louis is given a great choice between an apparent gift and a resulting darkness. When Lestat turns mortals into vampires, he is like a faked guru who promotes them with faked spirituality. While he may present himself as a kind, gentle, and civilized vampire richly dressed, his victims seem to have no choice indeed. At one level, when Louis says “goodbye to sunrise and becomes a vampire”, it seems to him a resurrection and a therapy from his former apathy. However, he further recognizes he is actually journeying the darker side of his soul (Rice, 33). Indeed, Lestat is the bad and disobedient horse which Louis tries to control as a charioteer, to borrow from Plato.

To reflect on Lestat, one might associate him with Foucault's idea of “biopower” which offers a way of managing a mass of population. Foucault says that contemporary technologies, which are politically centred, no longer aim to kill but to foster the life of the people by ensuing them politically and rationally (qtd. in Searle). Drawing upon this conception, Lestat, by “saving” his victims from death and presenting himself a “saving companion,” assures his social power of influence (86). This is one example which can fall on Louis as a manipulator among many in the novel.

As an indication of the power of Appetite, Rice blends the vampire's desire to kill with sexuality, which leads to reproduction of new vampires. When Claudia asks Louis to describe how “making love” looks like in mortal life, he answers: “I think it was the pale shadow of killing” (Rice, 209). The scene when Lestat exchanges blood with Louis to turn him a vampire is undeniably erotic. Blood, hence, stands to represent Eros and Lestat eventually becomes the gay “other” at one level and a social critique of the secret bodily Appetite of a society at another level in which even a shift in gender roles takes place.

Rice, of course, continues to expose more cultural taboos. As Lestat gives Claudia the “dark gift,” he makes her endure her stagnant five-year-old body while her mind becomes adult. On this regard, this transgression on the behalf of a little girl can be read as a parallel to the mad violation of girls' innocence in modern Western culture. Losing her innocence, Claudia feeds without moral choice and all her goals become external before she matures. Making her a vampire, Lestat assumes he constituted a real family, but that is with a faked happiness and harmony for sixty five years. As a result of his Appetite,

Lestat is burned to death because Claudia eventually cannot enjoy a body of a girl, which argues her need for physical Appetite. The fall of the house of Lestat highlights the need for a nuclear family that should be based on ethical laws in order to be functional. Such a result is led originally by Lestat's contamination of his soul which equally contaminated his victim.

Another aspect of Lestat's material worldview stems from his longing for affluence. An aristocratic bloodsucker, he sits "in the richest salons of the city, using his vampire keenness to suck gold and dollars and deeds of property" (31). Lestat indeed offers a good illustration of modern predatory consumer culture. Being both rich and powerful as a Bourgeois, it does not fail to be noticed that Rice may present him as a parody of the capitalist global economy.

In New Age conception, the soul belongs to the eternal world, but Rice's model puts only the Devil as an immortal category in the physical world. Armand, the oldest vampire in the novel, heard nothing about God during his existence, and hence, does not secure meaning of what is the Good and what is the Devil. In Eastern Europe, Louis and Claudia find a culture which has no faith within the existence of the immaterial self and which Armand describes as a "fatuous ...parody of the miraculous" (Rice, 287). It is the vampire's intense materialism which does not allow going above and regain awareness of the Ideal or the Good. The image of the Church, just like the Ideal, becomes "hollow, empty and black" (116).

III/ Louis' Journey to the Good:

However concealed, the Ideal still exists in the gothic world of vampires. In his hedonistic life, Lestat submits to the material demands of his body and constantly denies the existence of the Good, but when he is killed by Claudia, he makes sure enough that the realm of Good really exists. Louis constantly utters "Devil", but he surprisingly utters "God God" when was dying (108). A supposition is that when Lestat's soul got out of his body, it glimpsed the reality beyond.

The fact that Lestat is fascinated with the work of Shakespeare, which mainly talks about the transient nature of the body and the immortality of the Ideal, brings about a paradox (100). There must be evidence about Lestat's

acquaintance with the Ideal. This makes clear as daylight that the hedonistic world of vampires or of the modern man is just transitory and their souls belong originally to an eternal world of order.

Another evidence of the natural recognition of vampires with the realm of the Good is that though Lestat argues that he is the Devil, his Appetite does not approach Lestat's family or friends, a thing which surprises Louis. Likewise, though he is said to be "an idiot," his wisdom is invested rather in monetary matters in order to satisfy his financial Appetite. In short, this demonstrates that the character Lestat is of a dual self in which the material and the immaterial melt.

This image of duality is further exemplified by Louis, the conscious victim. Literally, Louis is a monstrous creature of the night whose "desire for blood was strong in him" (54). Although most vampires follow their Appetite, he chooses the path for a human spirit, which he could not yet achieve in his pre-vampire life. This does not mean that Louis represents Reason; rather, he displays an actual struggle against the evil faculties of his soul. He reflects an integration of his material and immaterial, body and spirit. This complex and interesting character will be analyzed in three different ways according to his events in different situations, which will show the reader that he is a rare example of a coherent soul that is in need not only in the vampire world, but in a non-vampire world also.

The transcendental image of Appetite and Reason is originally a result of Louis' fight against his own Appetite. Thus, we should not expect Louis following his Appetite as much as Lestat does; rather, we might expect a little Appetite manifestation and much reasoning for the purpose of his self-control.

A fundamental attribute of the Appetite is that it strives to stick into earth-line rather than rising into the celestial where it expires. This law falls convenient when the pre-vampire Appetite of Louis is "put to the point of death" (13). Lestat, who plays the role of god in the novel, says to Louis "If you drink from me you will live forever" (13). This framed choice is the most significant in the novel because it opens him the door to absolute physicality rather than spirituality. However, Lestat is seduced and gives eternity to his Appetite. This might be read as a direct expression of today's culture which

is hypnotized with its Appetite for immortality. Just like Louis longs to follow his Appetite, modern Western culture desires an immortal life through medical breakthrough.

The primal function of the Appetite is to be obeyed. Louis's inability to desert Lestat in spite of his hatred to him can be seen as a symptom of his obsession with his Appetite, and which becomes a powerful force against him. If Claudia did not limit the Appetite's activity by killing Lestat, Louis could not have quitted him. Relatively, Lestat's manipulation of Louis at the first stage of the novel reflects him as a good listener to the demands of his Appetite.

Being seduced by Lestat, Louis cannot succeed to avoid sins. After Lestat orders him to feed on a slave's blood, Louis does not listen to his Reason that tells him not to harm others; instead, he lacks kindness for the slave and is carried to act on his behalf. A related instance of this is when Claudia, who does not consider to hurt her preys, orders Louis to give Madeline the dark gift in the name of a need for a mother. Though he argues against her, he is finally defeated in spite of his conviction.

However more significant, in the course of Louis' failure to control his Appetite, he ultimately refrains to follow it and Lestat is put to finish what Louis has started when they were feeding on the slaves in the field. Louis's bites for his prey demonstrate his Appetite as a successful force, but it is further defeated by his Reason when he stops feeding. The fact that Louis is defeat by his Appetite shows that he does not deny the existence of a materialist faculty inside his soul. This brings for us the first constituent of a future coherent soul, as understood by Plato. His rebellion against his Appetite when he leaves his prey though causing him harm, presents a good sign of his process of self-control. This cannot but illustrate an internal struggle in Louis' faculties; a first stage for approaching the realm of the Good.

Because Louis' ethics do not fit his vampire world, he maintains his commitment to the other faculty responsible for his "virtue" (24). Reason does not support what the Appetite has to offer as new consciousness. A strong evidence of Louis' reasoning is his conviction that "killing is no ordinary"

(23). Hence, Louis refuses to feed on “mortals” and insists on consuming rats’ blood to meet his physical demands of vampire rather (25).

It is noteworthy that though Lestat is set immortal in the novel, he is described by Louis “a boring mortal, a trivial and unhappy as a mortal” (25). This shows that Appetite is transient nature for Louis. When describing him as nonsense equally demonstrates his awareness that the body is of less importance than the soul. All of Lestat’s *carpe diem* attitudes make him pursue mundane life. Going to restaurants, cabaret and carry financial matters are meaningless for Louis (65). He is consciously aware that pleasure principle leads neither to virtue nor to real immortality.

Another example of Louis’s authority of his Reason is his rebellion against Lestat. At some point, Louis acknowledges: “I was his complete superior and I had been sadly cheated in having him for teacher” (25). Waiting for company, Louis’s Reason meets with Claudia’s as she grows older, since she, too, witnesses internal conflict, yearns for knowledge and questions about her existence. As they both resemble, their Reason makes them break from Lestat and travel, though he comes back later and reinforces the gothic tone of the Appetite.

At the Théâtre des Vampires, when Louis witnesses the performance where Gentleman Death is draining the lifeblood of a young woman on stage, Louis’ Reason tells him not to react, for in such a situation Louis is either to be killed together with Claudia or to forcibly submit to his Appetite and follow the vampire’s bestiality. All what Louis could do is to internally suffer. Following that, his burning of the theatre in revenge for the death of Claudia and Madeline can be seen as a clear manifestation of his morality.

Socrates, who speaks through the tongue of Plato, says “Know thyself.” In the novel, it is Louis’s consciousness that makes him aware of his “Self”. Being immortal, Louis does not find it unconvincing to have a library and study. In spite of Lestat’s laughter at him, he strives to find value, meaning and purpose of his immortality: “my books are my meditations” (50). It would not be a surprise to find a book of Aristotle in Louis’ library, which also inspired Claudia (97). Aristotle’s work is mainly Platonic and argues around the notion of the essence of things in order to understand their external reality.

To fit our context, Louis (as Claudia) is aware about the necessity of the mind to understand the order of existence. Hence, the alliance of knowledge and Lestat as a body ends in upholding the Platonic unity of being which leads eventually to holistic thinking.

IV/ Louis and the Cosmic Wholeness:

What deserves to be underlined in relation to New Age is the idea of the undivided wholeness. Throughout Louis' discourse, it is evident he is conscious of a cosmic wholeness. The voice of this unity is well heard through this passage:

It was well past midnight when I finally rose out of the chair and went out on the gallery. The moon was large over the cypresses, and the candlelight poured from the open doors... I leaned against the end pillar of the gallery, my head touching the soft tendrils of a jasmine which grew there in constant battle with a wisteria, and I thought of what lay before me throughout the world and throughout time, and resolved to go about it delicately and reverently, learning that from each thing which would take me best to another. (Rice, 25-6)

The latter excerpt illustrates that Louis, mentally and bodily, is part of the material and abstract celestial reality. He achieves the unity of vision which for New Agers is relevant indeed for spirituality.

To be sure, another illustration of the previously mentioned New Age ecological thinking is the journey motif present in the novel. Travelling East to West to know the truth following his uncertainty of the vampire culture demonstrates that international boundaries are meaningless for Louis. We can agree, at least, that Louis's journey is a manifestation of his knowledge of his being as a citizen of the world as one. This transcendence qualifies him as an avant-garde of his age.

Conclusion:

To sum up, *Interview with the Vampire* offers a New Age teaching. It suggests that the modern man should exercise a self-study by meditating on his own history so as to be enlightened. Louis, after considering his mortal

life regrets his spiritless life, which illuminates him throughout the rest of the story. From the vampire life, Louis indicates that because of Claudia's death, he now sees "life precious" (64). Perhaps, this is what led Armand to tell Louis he is "the spirit of his age" (117). New Age presents an optimistic conclusion in the novel—that all humans are equal. In Rice's desperate novel, Louis could constitute a transcendent soul, but not all vampires. The fact that Lestat is aware of justice as previously argued, it demonstrates his ability to be as intelligent as Louis self. Vampires, and men by extension, all bear spirituality that needs to be revived.

Rice's message is clear. Humanity is at an end if man will not stop harming himself by submitting to his Appetite. The future of mankind, if not saved, will culminate in the monstrosity of people drinking their own blood. This gothic image is after all to stress a more optimistic message: man can, by nature, quite the violence created by his greediness and move towards a more sacred end. Man, in so doing, should be a transcendent of his internal faculties of Reason.

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