

WHY DO VAMPIRES PREFER LOUISIANA?¹

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Vampires have always enjoyed a relative fame in literature but it has been in recent decades when vampire fiction has become a well-known — and best-selling — subgenre in gothic fiction. Vampire novels usually appear as series that focus on the life and adventures of a vampire or a group of them (Hughes “Vampire” 245), and most of these series are written by women. Examples of this type of horror fiction are Chelsea Quinn Yarbro’s novels about le Comte de Saint-Germain, started in 1978 with *Hotel Transylvania* or Patricia Nead Elrod’s ‘vampire files’ with the vampire detective Jack Fleming as its main protagonist. However, according to Ken Gelder, the “best-known contemporary chronicler of vampires is without question Anne Rice” (Gelder 108). Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* and *New Tales of the Vampires* were possibly the most famous books about vampires during the 1990s and since the publication in 1976 of *Interview with the Vampire* — her first novel about vampires, none of Rice’s vampire novels have been out of print. Rice’s most famous vampire, Lestat, has gone beyond the literary realm and became a musical in 2005. Besides, *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Queen of the Damned* (1988) have both become movies in 1994 and 2002, respectively.

Apart from Rice’s vampire novels, the last one published in 2003, in the last ten years other female authors have made use of the figure of the vampire with great success. L.J. Smith reissued her *Vampire Diaries* (1991) in 2007 and the next book of this series is due in July 2010. Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Series (2005-2008) and Charlaine Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse Series complete the circle of bestselling authors who have appropriated the image of the vampire for her novels. What these three authors have in common with Anne Rice, apart from their success, is that the characters of their novels have also become alive somehow. L.J. Smith’s novels have been turned into a TV series in The CW Television Network, the same as Harris’s novels, which have become the series *True Blood* on the HBO channel. In the case of Stephenie Meyer’s series, her novels are being released as movies with great success. Therefore, the vampire has stopped being a frightful character to become a mysterious and attractive figure of great success and bestselling options.

Among the authors mentioned above, there are two of them who do not only share the success of their vampire series but also the setting for their stories. In spite of their different portrayal of the vampire, both Anne Rice and Charlaine Harris have chosen the state of Louisiana as the location for most of their novels. Most of Rice’s vampires live in New Orleans or at least have made the city a kind of sanctuary for these creatures of the night. In the case of Harris’s vampires, they live in the made up city of Bon Temps or in the near and real city of Shreveport, while New Orleans plays also an important role in one of the novels. Thus, both writers give a prominent position to Louisiana and to New Orleans in particular. One of the reasons why these writers have chosen Louisiana as setting for their series may be related to their personal background, since both writers have been linked to the southern United States the majority their lives.

Katherine Ramsland describes New Orleans as “home to Rice” (320). She lived there until she was fifteen years old, when her family moved to Texas, and then to San Francisco. However, twenty-seven

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years after her departure, Rice decided to return to New Orleans, where she lived until 2005 when she changed her residence to California just months before Katrina. Her childhood in New Orleans conditioned her writing and the character of her novels. She grew up in the Irish Catholic area of the city and although she forgot about religion for many years, in the last decade she has embraced Catholicism again and has chosen Christ as the protagonist of two of her last novels. Apart from the Catholic tradition of Spanish settlers and Irish immigrants, other cults such as voodoo and Creole Catholicism are of importance in the city and have influenced Rice's work. One of the most prominent features of Anne Rice as a writer of vampire stories is that she shifts the narrative voice from the human to the supernatural creature and, in fact, "she was possibly the first writer to narrate her stories in the first person from the vampire's point of view" (Gelder 109). Ken Gelder describes this feature of Rice's vampires as if they were coming out of the coffin in order to give what he calls "'the real story' (at last) about vampires" (109).

Coming out of the coffin is a phrase that could be applied to Charlaine Harris's vampires in her Sookie Stackhouse Series. In these novels, vampires decide to announce their existence publicly and to ask for their rights after the Japanese invention of a synthetic blood that enables them to live without having to kill humans. Although Harris does not use a vampire as the narrator, the protagonist of her novels are another supernatural being, Sookie Stackhouse, a telepath with fairy blood in her veins. Harris makes up the small town of Bon Temps and uses it as the main setting of her novels. According to Harris' description, Bon Temps is located in the northern region of Louisiana, near to the real city of Shreveport and not far away from Texas and Arkansas. Harris is a Southern woman who lives in Southern Arkansas although she was born and raised in Tunica, Mississippi. As in the case of Anne Rice, Harris' background may have influenced her in her decision to create Bon Temps in Louisiana. Besides, Harris has acknowledged that one of her literary influences is Anne Rice and that may also be crucial in her portrayal of the vampire and in the gothic atmosphere of her settings (Hall).

Apart from the biographical influence of these writers' background in their choice of Louisiana as the setting for their novels, this article aims at proposing other reasons as well. The state of Louisiana is very special from a historical and cultural point of view. The mixture of cultures and civilizations that have occupied the state throughout its history and more precisely the city of New Orleans, have made of Louisiana the perfect setting for exploring issues of difference. The purpose of this article is to relate the particular history and culture of Louisiana to Rice's and Harris's choice of it as a setting for their novels and to analyze the figure of the vampire as representative of the fears towards what is different and may pose a challenge to the established values of a particular society.

Katherine Ramsland states that New Orleans "is both a metaphor of, and the perfect setting for, vampires" because of its "multicultural milieu" (319-320). She describes the city with nouns such as "frivolity, superstition, contradiction, and sensuality" (319-320), and it is precisely because of these characteristics why she thinks that vampires may find a home in this city. But to understand why New Orleans is such a multicultural city, we need to consider its history. It was founded in 1699 "with a cross staked on a bend along the Mississippi River" and it "was officially settled by a Canadian-born Frenchman in 1718" (Ramsland 320). In his *Smithsonian Guide to the Deep South*, Roger Kennedy states that it was the French and the Spanish who first occupied the area (11). Catherine Ramsland specifies this statement a bit more when she explains that the first ones to inhabit the city were "misfits from French prisons, along with whores and 'casket girls' – women the Ursuline nuns brought over, who carried their belongings in caskets" (320).

As it normally occurs, after the first inhabitants aristocrats, merchants, farmers, and other kinds of immigrant came to the city. One of these groups of people was the French Canadians expelled from Acadia (Nova Scotia) by the British in the mid-eighteenth century. The Acadians settled in the area of Louisiana known as bayou county and started to be known as *Cajun*, a word that comes “from a muffled, perhaps drawled, pronunciation of ‘Acadian’” (Kennedy 28). In 1762, King Louis XIV gave New Orleans to Spain, marking the beginning of the Creole culture, who were descendants of French and Spanish families born in the New World and who had “a strong influence on the cuisine and architecture of the West Indies and southern Louisiana” (Kennedy 28). Later on, during the 1790s, many immigrants arrived to Louisiana, especially refugees from the French Revolution and from the West Indian Slave Rebellions (Kennedy 28). Spain gave back Louisiana to France in 1800 under the promise of never selling it again, but the area became American three years later (Ramsland 320).

One of the interesting things about the history of Louisiana is that the area has always been closely associated with slavery and discrimination. However, ethnic minorities were not always treated as inferiors. Although, until the Civil War, the economy of Louisiana was based upon slavery, in the early existence of the state, the French system of laws “guaranteed some rights to blacks, and prejudice against blacks was not as rigid as elsewhere in America” (Kennedy 22). Creoles, unlike most of the South, offered mulattoes and free people of color an important role in the society, in fact, “many free black themselves owned slaves, plantations, and urban rural estate (Kennedy 28). Besides, as Roger Kennedy posits, interracial marriages were not uncommon at the time, and when Louisiana became Spanish the rights of blacks were expanded. However, when the state was given back to the French, some of these rights were withdrawn, and finally eliminated with the American slave system (22).

Regarding its history, Louisiana is especially multicultural, not only because of the many immigrants that came to the state from different parts of the world but also because these immigrants mixed their cultures with the ones already existing in the state. Therefore, this openness to different cultures and minorities makes Louisiana and New Orleans particularly, the perfect home to vampires, even though some regions of this state are rather conservative and suspicious of immigrants and of people who could threaten their lifestyle. This ambiguity towards the so called other is mirrored in Rice’s and Harris’s novels by making use of the figure of the vampire. It is precisely because of the multicultural character of Louisiana why these authors have chosen this state to introduce a new and challenging minority, the vampire, in order to see how people react to their particular lifestyle. This way, the experiences described in their novels can be extrapolated and applied to our reaction towards difference, not only in terms of vampirism, but regarding race, gender or even species. In the case of Harris’s novels about Sookie Stackhouse, this analysis of what it means to be the other goes even further since the protagonist of the series is a telepath herself and we can also see other supernatural creatures such as werewolves, shapeshifters, witches and even a maenad. Therefore, vampires and other supernatural creatures embody the fear towards change and towards all which is unknown.

One of the most famous examples of how the vampire personifies the fear of society towards change and difference is that of *Dracula*. William Hughes is one of the authors that support the idea of the vampire “as the embodiment of authorial neuroses and as the coded expression of more general cultural fears of which the author is, consciously or unconsciously, an observer” (Hughes “Fictional” 145). In a similar way, Susan Sellers points out David Rogers’s introduction to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* because he also describes the figure of the Count as incarnating “the fears of late Victorian patriarchy, as the

certainties of male privilege, class hierarchy, rationality and the Bible were increasingly called into doubt” (80). As Hughes states, it seems that the vampire threatens “the integrity of race and nation” (“Fictional” 147) and at the same time challenges the cultural values by an alternative lifestyle that is unknown and thus feared.

The difference between Stoker’s portrayal of vampires and that of Harris and Rice is that the first one dissociates the vampire from humans and makes the vampire’s life something completely out of the human world. However, Rice’s and Harris’s vampires live in the world together with humans, they relate with humans and in the case of Harris, they even establish love relationships with humans. This way, readers do not feel such repulsion towards vampirism; instead, they are invited to perceive vampire’s habits as “a parallel lifestyle” that is characterized by “a change of diet” (Hughes “Fictional” 148-9). Anne Rice and Charlaine Harris are two of the writers who choose to portray their vampires this way, as inhabitants of the human world but with a different diet. This integration of the vampire is especially interesting in Rice, who chooses to make the vampires’ narrators and protagonists of their own stories and not just objects in a human’s story. This shift in the narrative voice “from human to ‘other’ perspective” makes readers feel some kind of sympathy toward the supernatural creature making his/her threat nothing more than fear towards what is “outside our frame of the familiar and the knowable” (Gordon and Hollinger 3). Besides, as Margaret L. Carter states, this change of perspective is also a sign of how the attitude towards the outsiders has changed in recent decades (Carter 27).

In the case of Anne Rice, her vampires sometimes appear as predators, although most of them try to feed from humans in a subtle and non-lethal way. In the case of Harris, vampires find it easier to live in contact with humans since they do not need to feed from them anymore, thanks to the invention of synthetic blood drinks. Most of the vampires Harris describes in her novels try to “go mainstream,” that is, to live together with humans respecting the laws and asking for their own rights. Harris’ vampires have their own government divided in kingdoms and each kingdom divided in areas governed by sheriffs. Besides, these vampires have their own political party and try to fight for their equality in American society. Therefore, what current writers about vampires do in their narratives, to a greater or a lesser extent, is to portray the vampire not as a separate entity but as a minority within the human world and it is sometimes precisely this condition of minority which makes them the target of prejudice (Hughes “Fictional” 151).

In Harris’ novels about Sookie Stackhouse, the situation of vampires as a minority is clearly evident. After the Japanese invention of synthetic blood, vampires all over the world decide “to come out of the coffin” and to make themselves visible to humans. For instance, in the short story “Dracula Night” Harris analyzes the situation of vampires throughout the world, explaining that in some regions their appearance had not been well received. For that reason and because the United States is one of the countries accepting these creatures of the night, many vampires were migrating there in order to survive. The migration of vampires to the United States was so huge that the Congress was even considering “various bills to limit undead citizens from claiming political asylum” (*Touch* 46). In these novels, as in Rice’s, the vampire becomes what Ken Gelder calls a “citizen of the world,” a creature whose immortality enables him/her to travel all around the world for centuries, creatures for whom “boundaries (national boundaries in particular) mean[t] very little” (111). For example, Rice’s Lestat travels from France to the United States and to other parts of the world and Louis joins Claudia in going through the European continent in order to find other vampires.

When Rice and Harris take their vampires into the real world and make them live with humans, we can see how the fear towards the vampire — the other — disappears. Gina Wisker studies how many women writers have chosen the figure of the vampire to fight against the restrictive and repressive norms of patriarchy towards otherness in terms of gender. Vampires represent the transgression of boundaries such as “life/death, day/night behavior” but they also — maybe because of their immortality — tend to establish ambiguous relationships with other vampires. For instance, in Harris’ work, some vampires declare themselves homosexual or heterosexual, but there are also examples of bisexual vampires. In the case of Anne Rice, it is even more complicated since her vampires are not able to have sex, although there are clearly erotic relationships like the one between Lestat and Louis.

Due to the fact that Rice’s and Harris’s vampires represent the transgression of boundaries regarding death and sex, they are sometimes regarded as dangerous and creatures that deserve to die. In Rice’s work, we see how Louis’s slaves react when they discover the true nature of their master and they try to kill him. In Harris’ novel, we see how vampires throughout the world are exterminated because of their condition and how some of them are prosecuted even in those countries described as hospitable. However, these vampires are not portrayed as evil predators without feelings. Both Rice and Harris describe them, sometimes using a first person narrator, as creatures that do not only provoke repulsion or fear but also attraction. The vampires in these writers’ novels cannot be classified as good or bad (Wisker 171), their actions speak of instincts but also of love, mercy, and passion. Their portrayal is sometimes so ambiguous and complicated that in some cases vampires can be considered more human than the men and women who blindly hate them and thus assume “terrifying, persecutory, and inhuman shapes” (Botting 286). For example, Harris’s novel *Living Dead in Dallas* depicts a religious organization, the Fellowship of the Sun, which tries to kill vampires in a ceremony they call “meeting the sun.”

Louisiana and especially New Orleans, is thus the perfect place for the vampire minority and for their transgression of traditional boundaries and dualisms. Due to its history, New Orleans is a multicultural place where life and death are usually interwoven. One of the most famous features of New Orleans is its cemeteries, usually called Cities of the Dead. As a result of the mixture of religious beliefs of the different peoples that have settled in New Orleans, the city is particularly famous for its devotion towards the dead. In one of Harris’s novels, *A Touch of Death*, she recalls the particular appearance of the cemeteries in New Orleans. These cemeteries have no ordinary tombs but aboveground crypts because the level of the water table in Louisiana makes it impossible to bury the dead below the ground. Harris describes these places as the Cities of the Dead and the crypts as “small white houses” sometimes even decorated (89). We see then how the frontier between life and death is somehow blurred in this city, just like the characters that appear in the novels by Harris and Rice. Critics like Mari Mulvey-Roberts think that these Cities of the Dead inspired Rice “to re-create her own subterranean inhabitants of a metropolis of death” (188).

One of the reasons why life and death coexist in such a special manner in New Orleans is the influence of the culture of voodoo in the city. Voodoo rites and beliefs are part of the culture of New Orleans and the root of many of the superstitions held by the inhabitants of the state of Louisiana. Voodoo came into the United States with the ships of slaves that travelled from Africa or from the French colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Santo Domingo (Webb 291-292). Both Anne Rice and Charlaine Harris acknowledge the relevance of voodoo superstitions and rituals in their novels. For example, Rice’s novels about the Mayfair witches include some voodoo practices and beliefs, especially those concerned with the barrier between life and death. In *A Touch of Dead*, Charlaine Harris refers to the character of Marie

Laveau as “a woman whose magical power had fascinated both black and white people, at a time when black women had no power at all” (92).

We have seen so far some of the possible reasons why these writers chose Louisiana and especially New Orleans as the setting for their stories. The particular history of the state made it a multicultural milieu where being different was the norm. Besides, the importance of the cemeteries and of voodoo beliefs, life and death coexist there in a particular harmony and with sometimes blurring limits. Due to all this, vampires find in New Orleans their home, a place where their difference is not a reason for discrimination but a new charm for the city.

The two most famous vampires of Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*, Lestat and Louis, met in New Orleans, where Louis lives on a plantation. In the first novel of the series, Rice describes the city as follows:

There was no city in American like New Orleans. It was filled not only with the French and Spanish of all classes who had formed in part its peculiar aristocracy, but later with migrants of all kinds, the Irish and the German in particular. Then there were not only the black slaves, yet unhomogenized and fantastical in their garb and manners, but the great growing class of free people of color, those marvelous people of our mixed blood and that of the islands, who produced a magnificent and unique caste of craftsmen, artists, poets, and renowned feminine beauty. Then there were the Indians, who covered the levee on summer days selling herbs and crafted wares. And drifting through all, through this medley of languages and colors, were the people of the port, the sailors of ships, who came in great waves to spend their money in the cabarets, to buy for the night the beautiful women both dark and light, to dine on the best of Spanish and French cooking and drink the imported wines of the world [...]. This was New Orleans, a magical and magnificent place to live. In which a vampire, richly dressed and gracefully walking through the pools of light of one gas lamp after another might attract no more notice in the evening than hundreds of other exotic creatures. (Rice *Interview* 40-41)

Rice chooses to depict New Orleans as it was before the Civil War. As it has already been mentioned, although Louisiana was mostly famous for its plantations worked by slaves, discrimination among class and race was not as common as one may expect. It was precisely because of this plurality of voices, colors, and cultures; that the city of New Orleans is depicted as the perfect residence for a vampire, whose difference would not be noticed among other exotic beings.

It is in New Orleans where Louis starts his life as a vampire and the place Lestat decides to consider his hometown. Lestat describes himself as “the most forsaken outpost of the Savage Garden” (Rice *The Vampire* 494), so he realizes his minority position as a vampire, as an exotic creature without a place in the world of the living. However, it is in New Orleans where he really feels at home, where he is able to feel that he “was not the exotic outcast that I imagined, but merely the dim magnification of every human soul” (Rice *The Vampire* 494). It is among all the exotic creatures that live in New Orleans where Lestat and vampires in general, can feel at ease and not discriminated for their condition.

This is also the point of departure of Harris’ portrayal of New Orleans. She describes in her novels that vampires decide to come out of the coffin when a synthetic type of blood is created. Although she talks about vampires that live in different parts of the world and especially in different places of the United States, she focuses her attention on Louisiana. It is particularly interesting how Harris acknowledges Rice’s novels as being real accounts of the lives of vampires. This particular tribute can be read in Harris’ *All Together Dead*, when she writes about New Orleans in the following terms: “New

Orleans had been the place to go for vampires and those who wanted to be around them ever since Anne Rice had been proven right about their existence. The city was like Disneyland for vamp” (9).

Even though Harris’ novels almost exclusively take place in the small town of Bon Temps in Northern Louisiana, New Orleans is referred to in several occasions and in different ways. In the previous quote we see how it is described as “Disneyland for vamp,” as a recreational place for vampires because of its long history in vampirism and for having been the place of residence of one of the most famous literary vampires, Lestat. In *Dead until Dark* there is a vampire that talks about New Orleans as “a mecca” for vampires (171), something that may be also related to the character of Lestat and to all the references to New Orleans that appear in Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*.

Due to the influence of Rice’s vampires and of the exoticism of the city, New Orleans becomes a compulsory meeting point for vampires and it is described as “the most popular city in the United States if you were one of the undead” (Harris *Touch* 88). The state of Louisiana is also the place that most vampires decide to use as a starting point when they arrive to the U.S., one of the countries that are fighting for vampire rights and citizenship. The importance of New Orleans for vampires is so huge according to Harris, that it is there where the first hotel for vampires is built. The hotel is called *The Blood in the Quarter* and it is located in one of the most famous areas in New Orleans, the French Quarter (Harris *Dead until Dark* 240). The hotel promises complete security and it is usually surrounded by curious tourists and by fang-bangers, people who enjoy the company of vampires and who freely offer their blood to these supernatural beings.

In *Definitely Dead*, Harris describes New Orleans as “a city of the night” (170). She also recognizes that the city is “like no other place in America, both before the vampire influx and after it” (*Definitely* 170) and maybe this is the reason why she, and Anne Rice before her, chose Louisiana as the setting for their novels about vampires. Both writers grew up in the South and were thus influenced by Southern values and traditions, by the ambiguity of how the Louisiana is considered rather conservative despite its mixture of cultures. In Rice’s and Harris’s novels, the vampires are no longer the objects of gothic stories with humans as narrators. These writers portray the vampires, sometime using their own narrative voice, as creatures of this world not so different from human beings. In their novels about vampires they challenge traditional ideas of good and evil or life and death by making readers reflect on how vampires are sometimes described in terms of feelings, love and fears, just as a common human. Throughout this article I have considered some reasons why vampires would choose Louisiana as their home place, and I think that the main reason why they would do so is because Louisiana, because of its exoticism and multiculturalism, makes them feel alive again.

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