

A Vampiric Revenant at the Cape (1834)

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Makanna, or the Land of the Savage, published anonymously in 1834, was hailed as the first novel in English to be set in Africa.¹ This largely forgotten Romantic-era text has recently come to critical attention owing to its place in African colonial literature, yet its gothic elements have been overlooked. Though the gothic features of the text are secondary to the romance plot, the novel does, however, introduce a vampire worthy of note as it is an early literary example of a non-aristocratic vampire. The novel also fashions a connection between the vampire and psychology, and the vampire as a metaphor for greed, a metaphor which was to gain in force over the rest of the nineteenth century.

In the second volume of this three-volume novel, the hero, Paul Laroon, sets out to meet the prophet Makanna in order to enlist his help in his campaign against the British. Laroon is a French Creole, an agent of the French government charged with destabilizing British colonial power globally. Makanna is based on an actual historical character who has come to be seen as the prototype of Nelson Mandela and the first freedom fighter in Southern Africa after his attack on the British forces stationed in Grahamstown in 1819.² Laroon is nervous about his meeting with Makanna, but also deeply anxious about the welfare of his beloved, Bertha Falkland, who has been kidnapped. On his solitary journey into the interior, Laroon falls into an exhausted slumber in which he dreams himself aboard his old ship, the *Ganges*, witnessing a scene as if through the eyes of an ‘ancient portrait’ (Vol. 2: 153) on the wall. Rather than an ocean outside, however, there is a ‘sapless forest’ which seems to oppress his beloved Bertha with its ‘unwholesome, dead, and mildewed branches’ (Vol. 2: 154). At this point, the dreamer witnesses an attack on Bertha:

A dimness gathered; and then arose a form, as that of one who had been buried and was not now alive, and yet was moved as with a living spirit, that could for evil animate its cold revolting limbs. With vampire greediness the figure staggered (for still the rigidity of death remained) on towards that lonely unprotected couch of sweet unconscious innocence: — Then came upon the sleeping youth the struggle of an agony: — The accursed blood-sucking livid lip pressed ardently the blue veined temple of the slumbering maid, then murmuring in her sleep, and monster-like, the shrunk and glassy eyes, with strange intelligence, gloating and fierce, gleamed on the bleeding victim. (Vol. 2: 155)

The dreaming Laroon recognizes the face of the revenant as that of one of his known enemies, a mutinous mariner, Stunted Mic, also known as ‘double-jointed Mic’ (Vol. 1: 60), who had been with him aboard the Ganges, and will threaten Bertha’s safety in the future. As Laroon sleeps, he is ‘impotent’ and ‘powerless’ to tear the ‘demon from his prey’ (Vol. 2: 155-6).

And then again, the hideous, animated corpse, seemed with its clammy icy hands to draw aside the maiden’s long depending tresses, that veiled her beauties even from the night, and pressed impatiently the gently swelling breast they shaded. (Vol. 2: 156)

At this point, Laroon awakes ‘convulsively’ with some ‘cold and moving substance meeting his touch’ (Vol. 2: 156). This turns out to be the ‘chill’ nostrils of his horse who has woken him as they are just about to be attacked by a pack of Hyenas who are approaching them because Laroon’s fire is down to its last ‘dying sparks’ (Vol. 2: 156).

There are no other occurrences of vampiric revenants in this novel, and Laroon’s nightmare has subsequently been forgotten in academic writings on vampires and in bibliographic catalogues, such as those of Brian Frost (1989) and Margaret Carter (1989). This creature is worthy of note, however, for several reasons, not least because it is a rare combination of revenant and vampiric bloodsucker. Before discussing the creature further,

though, I will set this dream in context within the novel. Laroon and Bertha meet on board the Ganges, bound for the Cape. On the way, Laroon is drugged by mutineers led by the Boatswain. While Laroon is insensible, the Boatswain attempts to assassinate Bertha. He breaks into her cabin and observes her while she sleeps. He is particularly drawn to 'her beautiful bosom heaving its soft entrancing orbs above the throbbing citadel of life' (Vol. 1: 146). This vision of her 'gentle heavings' spares her life, however, as the Boatswain resolves to rape her instead, 'a fate more revolting than the violent death so narrowly escaped' (Vol. 1: 147). The Boatswain drowns before having the opportunity to bring his nefarious scheme to fruition. Even though Laroon cannot have witnessed these events, they clearly pre-figure his vampiric dream, which also focuses on Bertha's bosom.³ The decaying foliage of the 'sapless forest', in addition, foreshadows the climax of the novel where Makanna and Laroon rescue Bertha from a forced marriage ('unwilling consent') (Vol. 3: 263) between her and Cootje, the son of Hugo Drakenstein, a 'Boor' who has kidnapped and hidden her near the supposedly haunted 'doomed chamber of the bridal' (Vol. 3: 257). This 'fatal chamber' is bedecked with 'rotting convoluted branches, and flabby leaves, hanging around in black and tangled masses' which give 'the idea of coils of serpents mingled with the folded wings of slumbering bats' (Vol. 3: 258). This location is avoided by the locals with superstitious dread. A certain 'rich man', Henrik van Sluysken, was to wed his fourth wife, a twenty two-year old 'beauty' from Cape Town who was quite happy to 'surrender her maiden charms to an amorous dotard, for the inheritance' she expected to gain rapidly (Vol. 3: 238-9). The wedding celebrations are described in terms of oriental luxury (Vol. 3: 239-40), and greed is certainly a motive for the match, rather than love. The wedding party was, however, raped and massacred by a band of Amakhosa warriors. The unlucky couple die in their bridal chamber, which is partially burnt. A wounded, incoherent man, speaks of some 'dreadful spectacle of unnatural horror' (Vol. 3: 247) in this chamber, and all subsequently avoid it. In

the manner of the explained supernatural, however, we learn that the story originates from the corpses of the couple, which are still in the chamber.⁴ Van Sluysken's corpse is 'a form of horror, standing erect, shadowy, motionless, and naked, and yet enough appeared to show it is, or had been, human' (Vol. 3: 300). Laroon sets fire to the chamber 'and all its oriental luxury', including the 'hideous mummy' which is all that remains of the murdered Henrik, and, 'on the bed itself, still more appalling, as being less decayed, and still flesh-like, as if in mockery of life, and human sympathies' is the body of his wife, 'as the fiend-like savages had left her' (Vol. 3: 301).

These three incidents, the attack by the Boatswain, Laroon's dream, and the bridal chamber, can be viewed as a tryptich with the common thread being rape of a member of the gentry by someone of a lower class or an Other (the Boatswain, a vampiric revenant with the face of Stunted Mic, a Boor, and 'fiend-like savages'). All three can also be viewed as instances of sexual and/or pecuniary greed, where the love that Laroon has to offer Bertha is conspicuously absent. Though the theme of love and greed is not well developed in the novel, the author does write about the "'animal magnetism" of Love and Avarice' where the 'lamentations of insatiable Avarice' are nothing compared to 'those of anxious or disappointed Love!' (Vol. 3: 306-7).

Just before describing Laroon's dream, the author speculates, without providing a conclusion, on whether or not this dream might be prophetic or just an example of 'remarkable coincidents' (Vol. 2: 152). He states that the modern '*sensible man*' will reject any notion of prophetic dreams, even though there is no evidence to support either opinion. The subject is 'absolutely inconclusive' (Vol. 2: 151). He then asks the reader to be 'indulgent' and imagine that even if dreams were not prophetic, this one certainly led to a 'substantial' 'result' (Vol. 2: 153). The author states, however, that it is Laroon's own 'imagination' which places him in his dream back on the Ganges, which suggests that the

‘unwonted exigence’ (Vol. 2: 153) driving the dream is Laroon’s own need or desire. As such, the vampire, who is clearly framed within the context of this dream, is obviously a psychological manifestation of Laroon’s own anxieties and perhaps otherwise unspeakable desires. Firstly, therefore, this creature is an early example in literature of a vampire that deliberately calls for a psychological explanation. The psychology of vampires has developed into a discourse of its own, such as can be found in David Cohen’s exploration of why vampires continue to intrigue us and why we might identify ourselves with them.⁵

Secondly, this vampire is also used as a vehicle to express anxiety about class. It has the face of a mariner, the dwarfish Stunted Mic, known to Laroon (himself a count, albeit of the recently defunct French aristocracy). It dares to suck the ‘blue’ blood of Bertha. Though Bertha is not an aristocrat, she is a member of the ‘gentry’ (Vol. 3: 331), and the vampire, by attacking her, violates class taboos. Taken in context with the Boatswain’s earlier threatened attack and the later danger of Bertha’s forced marriage in the ‘doomed chamber of the bridal’, where its previous female occupant had been raped by ‘savages’, this creature can be said to embody white upper-middle-class anxieties about ‘unconstrained lower class / Other male sexuality’.⁶ Though most early literary vampires were upper class, a trend set by Polidori (1819), this creature shows that the vampire was not exclusive to the aristocracy in the public imagination, and could be used as a vehicle to express fear of the lower classes as well.

Thirdly, and perhaps most interesting, is the link made between vampirism and greed in this text. Though this link is not fully developed, the author has established a connection between sexual and pecuniary greed in these three incidents as well as including a deliberate disquisition on Love and Avarice. A pointed connection between vampires and greed is made twice in the novel, first in the account of cannibalism (see footnote 5), and second in the ‘vampire greediness’ of Laroon’s dream.

Sharon Sutherland notes ‘the prevalence of the image of vampiric greed in the popular imagination well before the publication of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*’ (2006: 146). One of the very early examples of this image occurs in *The Harmonicon*, where the anonymous author excoriates Spanish priestcraft that ‘preys upon [the sons of Spain] with the same vampire greediness that it did upon other parts of Europe four centuries ago’ (1830: 476). In a diatribe ‘On Charity’ in *The Ladies’ Repository* – ‘B’ sees greediness itself as vampiric. ‘Vampire greediness’ causes many of the world’s problems (1842: 63). In Laroon’s dream the vampire is greedy not only for blood, but also for Bertha’s maidenly ‘innocence’. As Nick Groom shows, the links between vampires and commerce had already been made in the 18th century (2018: 156), but these examples show that vampires can metaphorically be greedy for almost anything. What makes the vampire such a potent metaphor for any type of consumption, it seems, is the persisting notion of the vampire’s ‘greed’, as we find in Thomas Moore’s poem ‘Corruption’ of 1808: ‘That greedy vampire’.⁷ The reference to ‘vampire greediness’ in Laroon’s dream suggests that the image of the vampire as the ultimate consumer was already fairly commonplace by the 1830s, though I have only managed to locate two earlier examples: *The Harmonicon* and Moore’s poem. Much more research needs to be conducted to establish when and how the first links between vampires and greed were made, especially as the vampire became such a powerful metaphor in the critique of many of the world’s perceived ills.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, the review in the *Athenaeum* (1834: 195). Ian Glenn speculates that the author might have been a member of the British Military (2019: 81).

² See Julia Wells (2012) for a comprehensive history of Makanna.

³ Whilst becalmed, the crew of the *Ganges* have also terrified each other with tales of cannibalism. They talk of how dying shipmates watch their messmates with ‘greedy joy’ and how, before the man has even died ‘the limp and wasted limbs were gashed; — and how, with vampire-thirst, they sucked the empty veins – tore the shriveled sinews from the bones

— and gorged to madness on the soul-revolting banquet!’ (Vol. 1: 254-5). This tale primes the reader to expect further vampires, and creates a link between vampires and greed. These two horrific paragraphs were plagiarized verbatim five years later in ‘The Black Pirate’ (651).

⁴ Besides Laroon’s dream, which will be discussed later, there are no examples of the possibly unexplained supernatural in this novel. The supernatural is usually a projection of psychological fears, as in Volume 1, where we see the mutineers ‘whose minds had been recently agitated with the supposed supernatural’ being ‘awe-struck with imaginary fears’ (217).

⁵ See David Cohen (2018).

⁶ I am thankful to the anonymous peer reviewer for this formulation.

⁷ Quoted in Groom (157).

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