

Short Story 194*: The Vampire Kiss

The Urth list — 6 messages, 2 voices, 22 Apr 2015

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 15:26

THE VAMPIRE KISS

"The Vampire Kiss" first appeared in the April 2005 edition of **Realms of Fantasy** and has never been collected.

SUMMARY

The story is narrated by Mr. Fagin, one of the villains of Charles Dickens' **Oliver*

Twist. He begins by speaking of "his" boys, found on the street or sent to him by others (of course, he uses them to steal goods and pickpocket, keeping the proceeds or reselling them). Rejoicing in their lack of education, he also praises those who were "someone's darling child not so long ago" because they can clean up after themselves and speak properly. As he is frying sausages one night, one of his boys, Tommy, comes up and says, "It reminds me of a way they said I might kill her, though I never did, even when I found her grave" (referring to the cooking fire, though for a moment Fagin considers the sausage as a method of execution). The rest of the story is told primarily from Tommy's point of view.

Tommy describes how his impoverished family lodged near the Green in London above a shop which sold a huge assortment of odds and ends: pistols, watches, rings, games, and even "a set of false teeth — that came and went like a ghost." Tommy would stare at a walking stick filled with candy in the hopes the elderly proprietor would share, but the best he could hope for was a bun or tea. His father seemed near death, but still fought for life, being too sick to work. His mother sold tea in another woman's shop: "The other woman paid her, and gave her a little tea, too, every day. Loose tea, you know, that she'd put in her pocket and bring home." Both become sick.

The elderly woman they were renting from had some mercy, giving them some food and telling them, "a ghost was drinking Mother's blood, and Father's too." She advises them to get crosses and puts garlic around the father's neck. Tommy makes a cross out of two stick and puts it over the bed, and uses scissors to make one, hiding it underneath the bed. He goes out to look in the cemeteries to see if he can find the root of the problem.

One October or November night (probably Halloween) he is awoken, and hears the bells of St. James' steeple chiming midnight, and as he thinks of going to the fire lit by the "unwanted" coal he finds dropped in the streets, he sees a beautiful, hungry apparition wearing a bonnet with black ribbons and a large stiff crinoline skirt. He returns to bed and pretends to sleep, noticing that as she leaves she no longer appears hungry.

His father soon dies and they sell the furniture to bury him. Tommy continues to beg for food at the neighbors, and admits, "I'd like to say now that I brought it back to Mother and we ate it together, but it wouldn't be true. I ate there — and sometimes I ate it all," though at times he

brings her back food as well.

As he is trying to get another boy to teach him to steal apples without getting caught, the boy George Peters tells him that a beautiful lady who lived in his house had poisoned herself years ago, and others insisted that her husband had killed her and the body was never found, though he was hanged for it, and that she might be buried in the cellar.

He goes down to the cellar with a stub of candle, and though he finds nothing, at night he realizes that he had intended to look behind a box down there and somehow forgotten about it before he did. He lights his candle from the fire and descends, noting "It was different at night — Bigger somehow, and the air was different." He finds nothing behind the box, but when he turns around, he sees a deep grave in the middle of the cellar floor which he couldn't possibly have missed before. "I suppose I went over to look in, though I have never remembered going there." He stares at her until she opens her eyes, admitting he should have staked her: "I'm shamed now; shamed to own myself a coward; but I slept with my mother that night and trembled at every little sound." In the morning, he resolves to find a stake and mallet after getting food, but when he returns with crusts for his mother, she is already dead.

After the beadle is informed and her grave finally dug, he eats the crusts of bread he had intended to leave with his mother in the grave. By the time he returns, it is dark, and as the boys ask him whether he had touched his mother's body or not, then the woman he had seen in the night appears. She notes him and bends down to give him a kiss, saying, "Poor, poor child."

He notes that the other boys are envious of him, and he feels "proud and bad at the same time". Soon a boy comments, "She ain't a dab beauty is she" Oh, no! Not a bit of it, and the other boys pick up commenting in this spirit. One notes that the woman "Had a spot o' tallow on her bodice though. Candle dripped, I reckon." Tommy is overcome with a need to get away from the Greens, expressing disbelief at their talk.

Tommy finishes his story and Fagin gives him a sausage in the hope of persuading him to elaborate further, but Tommy merely thanks Fagin and leaves to rejoin Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger.

Fagin concludes, "He has been taken now, poor Tommy has, and transported as we hear. His tale has remained with me, however; thus I set it down."

COMMENTARY:

"The Vampire Kiss" seems to be a straightforward tale for Wolfe, employing the dominant theme that external glamor and even poor social conditions are often parasitic in nature, though those trapped inside those conditions are often easily dissuaded from the proper focus for their ire and dissatisfaction. The vampiric woman, if the tales on the street are to be given credence, was probably poisoned in her life, and she feeds off of a family in turn. The mother takes tea from her employer, probably hiding it in her pockets without the owner's knowledge, despite Tommy's claims of the employer's generosity. Tommy himself eats most of the food he scavenges before he returns it to his family. Fagin is famous for this kind of parasitism, but in Dickens he is in turn condemned to death for essentially earning a dishonest living. His culpability is in letting others, primarily children, take the risk for him and facing execution as well. The entire societal structure is based off of this scavenging — no real redress or justice seems conceivable in Wolfe's story, for Tommy is actually proud of the fake sympathetic kiss he gets from the being who fed off his family, rather than blaming her for his condition. He becomes angered when they begin to speak of the woman in common fashion, but never seems to blame her for the death of his parents (it even seems at times that his mother had become

just another mouth to feed to him). Even when Tommy resolves to get a stake to defend them, first he must scrounge for food, and when he returns with his crusts of bread it is too late; he intends to throw them in his mother's grave, but winds up eating them. In addition, it seems that the vampire's beauty prevents the boy from staking her, showing the allure of food and the hope of some sexual attraction as something stronger than the urgency of family ties. The underlying social structure is one in which the denial of necessary food and resources creates a kind of condescending parasitism which seems entirely circular and self-justified — Tommy freely takes and selfishly consumes, and is proud of the small token of social status that a kiss which killed his parents and left him bereft gives him. It leaves him to be taken advantage of by another parasite in Fagin, though one in a superior position who masks his reality behind structure and kindness (and even throws his boy a sausage rather than tea or a bun, though in the end Tommy will be exiled to Australia).

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

Wolfe has a well-documented fondness for Charles Dickens, and much like “Our Neighbor by David Copperfield” and “The Doctor of Death Island”, this story directly employs characters from the 19th century English novelist. While generally considered a realistic and at times social novelist, Dickens was not averse to portraying supernatural situations. In both Wolfe’s story and in **Oliver Twist**, the importance of food as a basic necessity and the illusory nature of kindness in society are depicted. Fagin and his boys represent the first kindness that *Oliver Twist* encounters after the scarce conditions of his youth, but it is an artificial one based on exploitation and appearance. In Wolfe’s story, Tommy is at times given tea and food by an elderly couple and later even protected by Fagin, but this social stewardship is just another form of parasitism. The glowing pride Tommy feels at the beautiful female vampire kissing him is just another triumph for appearance over reality — buying into a destructive and seductive glamor for the social approval it garners. Yet when the mystery is spoiled by the talk of boys, he wants an escape. It is possible that his story has been designed to get Fagin's sausage, for once he attains it, he refuses to speak more on the subject.

One of the features of Dickens in general that can be detected in **Oliver Twist**, which Wolfe has also employed here, is the metaphor of those who eat and those who are eaten. The emphasis on sausages, tea, and food and the manner in which even families often selfishly distribute these life sustaining items throughout Wolfe’s story directly parallels the dire situation at the start of **Oliver Twist**, which emphasizes the failure of charity. The underlying assumption, that poverty was a disease born of laziness, led Dickens to portray the charity workers themselves as the picture of lazy ineffectuality. As the novel progresses, this is overtaken by a strain of false kindness exemplified by Fagin, whom Wolfe employs as our primary narrator. Dickens himself deployed some of the metaphors of the supernatural in several of his stories, including **Bleak House**, though they were often tied to a didactic or social illustration commenting upon society, and here it feels as if Wolfe is doing much the same thing.

While Stoker's **Dracula** shows vampirism as a disease, some earlier gothic novels tended to treat vampirism as a separation and seeking for God and peace or as a literal rendition of the conflict between heathen passion and Christian self-control. The vampire woman in Wolfe's story is not the monstrous shambling corpse of some Eastern European tradition, but one of glamor and beauty.

SETTING AND THE COCK LANE GHOST:

Tommy says that his family lodged “near the Green” in London, and this appears to be modern day Clerkenwell Green. (A modern pub of the name “The Green” is located, right around the

corner from St. James' Church Garden, the bells of which can be heard in the story.) Clerkenwell Green is also where Dickens situates Fagin and his boys. One of the myths prevalent in the region is that of the "Cock Lane Ghost", which Dickens actually alludes to in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Dombey and Son*. This story, while historical, is based on a real deception. The story occurred a short distance from St. Paul's Cathedral in the mid 18th century. After the death of the money lender William Kent's wife in childbirth, he became involved with her sister, Fanny, who later died of small pox. At their property, knocking and ghostly apparitions were reported. A parish clerk named Richard Parsons owed Kent money, and Parson claimed that the ghost of Fanny was haunting him, and that the ghost claimed Kent poisoned Fanny with arsenic. Later it was revealed that Parson's daughter Elizabeth was responsible for the strange events which simulated a haunting, put up to it by her father either in revenge or to avoid paying back his debt. (Chambers).

This only has superficial resemblance to the situation in Wolfe's story: "George Peters said there had been a lady in our house who had killed herself already, years and years ago. Poisoned herself, he said, but some of the others said no, it was her husband who murdered her, and her body was never found. Only they hanged him for it anyway is what they said. Then another said he had buried her in the cellar, and they found her there, and that was why they hanged him." The rumors of poison and a supernatural existence after a possibly obscured murder are similar, but the fates of the husband in the boy's talk and William Kent are obviously very different, as Kent was exonerated.

Besides this ghost story, Clerkenwell was famous for watchmaking and had a high percentage of Italian immigrants, and Wolfe's description of the shop accounts for this: 'Watches, sir, and rings such as you have here, silver teapots, too, and games with the kings and queens and castles and things all carved of ivory.' Perhaps the foreign shop owners are Italian, though the tradition of staking a vampire is commonly Slavic. The crinoline skirt the woman wears would have been somewhat contemporary, with the fabric appearing in the 1830s and the actual structured skirt being commonly referred to by that name by the 1850s (*Oliver Twist* was published from 1837-1839 in serial form).

Despite the echoes of the Cock Lane Ghost, which turned out to be a grand deception, there does not seem to be enough external evidence to doubt Tommy's story as a deception save that Tommy refuses to expand upon the story once he has achieved a sausage (before going outside to rejoin Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger — another prominent character in *Oliver Twist* who is quite proficient at pick pocketing and deception, usually acting as a man even though he is still but a boy)).

RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE:

While there may or may not be an explicit reference to the Cock Lane Ghost, at the time that infamous story, which was referenced by Dickens, sparked a religious controversy between Methodists and Anglicans. Methodists saw supernatural events as confirmation of an afterlife, and some Anglicans saw this as a primitive left over of England's Catholic past. While Wolfe can almost always be trusted to espouse a dualistic world view in which death is not necessarily the end, this particular afterlife story has very little of redemption in it — it is simply a continuation of the cycle of preying upon others which existed during life, and it seems that the woman, Fagin, and Tommy himself are all to some degree guilty. The crosses which Tommy constructs are completely useless, as is the garlic. If there is any redemption in this story, it seems to have little to do with the bells of St. James — nor is deliverance to be found at the fond recollection of the Jewish Mr. Fagin.

At least in this story, hunger seems to be an obstacle to happiness, faith, and salvation, and the

search for necessary food, whether this be crusts of bread or the blood of the innocent, creates a vacuum which only superficial things can begin to fill. The boys admit that she is attractive, and this talk for some reason upsets Tommy. Perhaps he realizes then that it is her beauty which kept him from acting and cost him his mother, letting all manner of unfulfilled hungers supersede the faculties which would have preserved his family.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

When Bob Perkins says, "She ain't a dab beauty is she" Oh, no! Not a bit of it, it seems to be an ironic statement such as, "Isn't she a beauty?" though he is quite literally saying: "She isn't a striking beauty. No." When the other boys pick up this talk in the same vein, the narrator can't believe it and "wanted to be gone from the Green that moment." Is he angered by the base way they are talking about her? Quite clearly they are impressed by her beauty and the statement is intended to be ironic. Why does this anger him so?

Is the Tommy of this story the older boy just released from prison, Tommy Chitling, from **Oliver Twist**? Since Fagin is executed at the culmination of Dickens's novel and Tommy Chitling has been released from a recent stay in prison, it does not seem that they could be the same boy (Wolfe's secondary narrator is transported to Australia as was the custom for some criminals in England at the time). During some of the banter in **Oliver Twist**, Tommy Chitling is mocked for his supposed devotion to a woman, but otherwise there is little reason to assume that they are the same character.

Is there any significance to having the villainous Fagin and one of his boys serve as the narrators? Dickens descends into Fagin's point of view at some length right before his execution, but is the story just a means for Tommy to get Fagin's sausage? After all, it is the sausage which reminds him of the manner in which he was supposed to kill the supernatural force — fire. The need for food and sustenance and its corrupting influence seems to be a major theme of both Dickens's social commentary and Wolfe's story, given the attention paid to the distribution of food and the rather weak tea that serves as a substitute for true nourishment. In addition, Fagin's lies at the end of **Oliver Twist** are responsible for the death of the prostitute Nancy, who does not actually betray the man who kills her, even though Oliver tells him that she does. Why have the selfish, manipulative Fagin be the primary narrator?

Why do the false teeth disappear in the shop? Is there any symbolic relationship to the vampire and her actual existence?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS

Wolfe loves Charles Dickens' allusions, spanning from "Our Neighbor by David Copperfield" to "The Doctor of Death Island". Despite the double narrative presented from a rather infamous thief and abuser of children, the story still seems pretty straightforward in its riff on the supernatural and folk stories. Wolfe's interest in horror grew throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and there are some motifs (like the young woman doomed to the grave) that are also present in "My Name is Nancy Wood" and some of his other horror offerings.

RESOURCES

Chambers, Paul. **The Cock Lane Ghost: Murder, Sex and Haunting in Dr Johnson's London.** Stroud: Sutton, 2006.

Dickens, Charles. **Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy's Progress**. Gutenberg.org. 10 Oct 2008. Web. 14 April 2015. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/730/730-h/730-h.htm>

Jeffery Wilson clueland.com — 23 Apr 2015, 08:06 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 4/22/2015 10:26 AM, Marc Aramini wrote:

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I think there is an obvious alternate interpretation; Tommy disappears and rumor and hearsay fill the gap with him being taken and transported, when he was instead "taken" by the woman from the cellar.

Jeff Wilson - < jwilson at clueland.com >
A&M Texarkana Computational Intelligence Lab
< http://www.tamut.edu/cil >

marcaramini — 23 Apr 2015, 12:49 · follows Jeffery Wilson clueland.com

I guess that would depend on whether Fagin saw a trial or heard of an arrest, "but, yes, "transported" is pretty ambiguous language. ?Dickens makes such a big deal about the trial and execution of Fagin ... would Fagin simply assume tommy is transported rather than executed or incarcerated if he simply disappears?"

Sent via the Samsung Galaxy Alpha?, an AT&T 4G LTE smartphone

----- Original message -----

From: "Jeffery Wilson clueland.com" <jwilson at clueland.com> Date: 04/23/2015 1:06 AM (GMT-07:00) To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net> Subject: Re: (urth) Short Story 194*: The Vampire Kiss

On 4/22/2015 10:26 AM, Marc Aramini wrote:

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marcaramini — 23 Apr 2015, 13:48 · follows marcaramini

I guess the question in determining that remains, is the theme that society and justice are more monstrous than a monster ...With the Dickens characters, I assume that must be in there somewhere.

Sent via the Samsung Galaxy Alpha?, an AT&T 4G LTE smartphone

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marcaramini — 23 Apr 2015, 13:49 · follows marcaramini

I.e. - a monster spares the boy, but the courts won't?

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Jeffery Wilson clueland.com — 23 Apr 2015, 16:23 · in reply to marcaramini

On 4/23/2015 7:49 AM, marcaramini wrote:

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"He has been taken now, poor Tommy has, and transported as we hear. His tale has remained with me, however; thus I set it down."

All this requires is that Tommy does not return when expected. "as we hear" is almost certainly meant to imply hearsay, so someone not appearing in the story speaks of Tommy's

transportation with conviction to someone who relates it to Fagin.

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