



**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES**

**Epistemology of the coffin: An Analysis of the Queer intersections in  
Anne Rice's The Vampire Lestat**

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### **Statement of Intellectual Honesty**

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

Signature and date: 12/06/2025

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

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## **Abstract**

Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2018) is arguably one of the most powerful queer vampire narratives of the English language. Through the character of Lestat de Lioncourt, more specifically through his development in the novel *The Vampire Lestat* (1985), I aim to pin down what makes the vampire a queer symbol. This dissertation will argue that Lestat, as well as Rice's vampires as a whole, represent a radical queer symbolism that marks the culmination of earlier vampire narratives.

The research presented will have three parts: the first will focus on Lestat's connection with classical queer archetypes in literature, as well as the inherent connection between the vampire and the queer. This part will also include the research on texts about vampirism that predate *The Vampire Lestat*, such as the analysis of *Dracula* (1897) or *Carmilla* (1872). Then, using the works of queer theorists, I will propose the connection between the 'coming out narrative' and the way Rice's vampires experience vampirism, followed by an analysis on how *The Vampire Chronicles* intersects with the AIDS epidemic and the narrative of death and contamination for the third and final segment of this dissertation.

**Keywords:** Anne Rice, *The Vampire Lestat*, *Interview With the Vampire*, Queer Theory, AIDS, Gothic literature

## 0. Introduction

The intrinsic connection between vampirism and queerness can be traced back to some of the earliest works concerning the undead in English fiction. From the moment Polidori wrote *The Vampyre* (1819), the first instance of vampirism in English literature, these creatures have been shaped around the ghost of queer desire. This dissertation bases itself on the understanding that no queer vampirical text can exist in isolation, and that it is essential to understand the contexts and intertexts that have built the vampire canon to produce a proper analysis of any vampirical text. The works conducted by researchers such as Nina Auerbach or Ken Gelder have offered a comprehensive analytical timeline of the history of vampire literature, as well as its parallelism with symbolic queerness, and have provided the skeleton to support this TFG's thesis.

Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2018) holds a place of deep significance within the vampire canon, precisely because of its connection to its past both regarding vampire literature and other archetypal forms of queerness. While *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), the first novel in the series, introduces some of these epistemological questions, it is its sequel *The Vampire Lestat* (1985) that elevates their complexity, as well as opens the door to a new world of possibilities about what queer vampires can truly be. Even though this dissertation focuses on the latter novel, it will engage extensively with *Interview With the Vampire* in order to compare Louis and Lestat, and also to argue for the corrective nature of *The Vampire Lestat*.

However, analyzing Lestat as a radically queer symbol requires more than just understanding the vampire canon: one must look into the other archetypes that make him distinctive. Texts such as James Bell's "Decadence, Dandyism and Aestheticism in *The*

*Vampire Chronicles*” (2006) shed light on the additional layers of Lestat de Lioncourt as a character: Lestat presents a new radically queer idea not only because he conflates the pinnacle of queer gothic vampirical traits in its most coded language, but also because he encapsulates the Queer Brat archetype. Rice coins the term ‘Brat Prince’ to refer to Lestat for the first time in *Queen of the Damned* (1988), when Marius first says: “Lestat, you are the damndest creature! (...) You are a brat prince.” (Rice 7), but the correlation between the Brat and the Queer is one that can be found in previous texts, classical and gothic.

This dissertation aims to make use of both the vampirical literary tradition, as well as the works of queer theorists in order to pinpoint what made Lestat such an influential figure in modern queer vampirical fiction. Some of the theoretical ideas that this thesis will expand on are the concept of Queer Coding, as well as the epistemological analysis of the social understanding of the closet as theorized in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991). The study of the political climate surrounding the publication of *The Vampire Chronicles* will also be of great importance, especially concerning Ronald Reagan’s mandate and its consequences on the American population. This viewpoint will aid in understanding the correlation between HIV narratives and the shift in vampiric literature.

The research conducted in this thesis will aim to answer these fundamental questions: what makes Anne Rice’s vampires queer, in a text with no explicit descriptions of sexuality? And most importantly, what makes Lestat de Lioncourt such a radically queer character, both in reference to past vampiric influences as well as latter ones? In the post-2000s vampire craze age, these questions acquire additional urgency: If vampires

can be sanitized into losing their monsterhood and queerness<sup>1</sup>, what is the underlying trait that makes queer vampires *queer* without the need for explicitness? The study of vampiric literary tradition will provide some background to spot these traits, as well as queer literature as a whole. Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* will function as the framework to reflect on these thesis questions, especially Lestat de Lioncourt as the character with more symbolic weight in relation to queer symbolism. This research aims to prove that Lestat, as well as Ricean vampires as a whole, occupy a place of notorious radical queerness and manage to break boundaries that were not broken before and perhaps will not be broken again.

## 1. Context: From the Vampire to the Brat

Understanding Rice's vampires, especially Lestat, requires a fundamental analysis of the literature preceding them. Both vampiric gothic literature and queer classical archetypes are an unavoidable influence when it comes to building Lestat's identity, and this section of research will focus on not just mapping the natural connections between vampires but also presenting another queer archetype that influences Anne Rice's work.

When analyzing the vampire – *any* vampire – through the lens of queerness, and with it the lack of said queerness in contemporary vampire literature, it is possible to understand the vampire's queer identity as something explicit. The 21<sup>st</sup> century vampire has made their queerness into an identity affair: contemporary vampire fiction like *Trueblood* (2008) presents both characters who identify as gay and vampires who label

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<sup>1</sup> As the ones popularized by Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005-2008) or seen onscreen in the 2009's TV series *The Vampire Diaries*



themselves as straight. The explicit optics could, then, be applied to previous vampires and assume that their queerness must not be tacit. However, a look into vampire studies such as the ones conducted by Auerbach or Gelder paint a different picture: the literary vampire is queer implicitly, it is queer because it was born from and for the queer experience. As Gelder states in the introduction of *Reading the Vampire* (1994):

Reading the Vampire embeds vampires in their cultural contexts, showing how vampire narratives reproduce the anxieties and fascinations of their times—from nineteenth-century investments in travel and tourism, issues of colonialism and national identity and obsessions with sex, to the ‘queer’ identity of the vampire. (Gelder, 2-3)

Which is to say that his approach, which will serve as a guide for this thesis, functions on the understanding that vampires are a projection of the anxieties of their political contexts, and that it is precisely this phenomenon that builds their queer identity as intrinsic.

Vampiric literature inevitably refers us to Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819) and Byron’s *Fragment* (1819), both narratives born from a “tacit homoerotic desire, which many critics have read in relation to the authors’ personal relationship” (Lau 5). The vampire, then, emerged in English literature as a vehicle for an inherently queer longing: both narratives tell the story of two men who embark on a trip, parallel to the one Polidori and Byron took together mere years before the stories were written. As Gelder puts it in *Reading the Vampire*, “I commented on the vampire narratives of Byron and Polidori. Both Byron’s unfinished story and Polidori’s *The Vampyre* present a relationship between a younger and an older man - the former being deeply attracted to the latter”. (Gelder 83) There seems to be an inherent connection between the queer and the vampire that goes beyond the explicit, and that can be found through the exploration of the themes of these two narratives: the identity of a vampire is something hidden, a condition that urges the

bearer to fulfill a desire that must remain obscured. It is undeniable that vampiric literature has been haunted by the ghost of desire from its conception, an idea that will be present in Rice's vampire narratives.

Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871) reinforces the connection between the vampire and homoerotic desire. While the novella has no sexual content in its most explicit reading, it is the very nature of the vampire that is charged with tension. Carmilla's hunt and subsequent feeding on Laura are described through the language of seduction and even love. Laura's dreams are erotic in nature, based on physical contact that knits queer desire into the memories of blood drinking. The vampire's feeding happens directly on the breast, turning it into a ritual that seems to feed more needs for Carmilla than that of hunger.

The eventual writing and publication of *Dracula* (1897), namely the pinnacle of vampire literature, comes from a previous history of implicit queer vampires, but while there is a layer of homoeroticism between Jonathan Harker and the Count in those few feeding scenes in his castle, the queerness of Stoker's novel seems to come from a completely different viewpoint. While the connection between Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker may not appear immediately obvious, scholars such as Thalia Schaffer have pointed out the correlation between Wilde's conviction for Sodomy and the almost immediate writing of *Dracula*. Stoker, when consulting his correspondence with American poet Walt Whitman, seems to have been affected by this status quo. He writes:

“[...] but I know I would not be long ashamed to be natural before you. ... You have shaken off the shackles and your wings are free. I have the shackles on my shoulders still – but I have no wings. If you are going to read this letter any further, I should tell you that I am not prepared to give up all else' so far as words go.” (Traubel 182)

Where the previous vampire literature was the messenger of repressed queer desire, *Dracula* is the fear of a punished queer freedom. *Dracula* relies on what Thalia Schaffer labels “The Crisis of the Closet in 1985” (Schaffer 382), the fear of both remaining in the closet and coming out of it. Like the Count’s vampirism, homosexuality is somehow a secret that everybody knows. Stoker’s vampires, including all the victims of the Count, find themselves in the impossible choice between admitting their vampiric nature and keeping it a secret.

The closet and vampirism become as intrinsically connected as desire, an idea that will prevail within Rice’s vampire: where Lestat’s vampirism is desire, Louis’ is shame. The former, however, seems to carry the weight of a queer past not just from his vampire lineage, but in his own character. *The Vampire Chronicles*’ queer potential peaks with its second novel, *The Vampire Lestat*, precisely due to its main character’s convergence of queer archetypes. Lestat is not just referred to as the Vampire Prince, but the “Brat Prince” (Rice 7) an equally queer literary archetype. Lestat’s own existence is therefore an intertext for a history of male characters, predominantly queer, that have grappled between love, desire, and their pride.

Western literature cannot be understood without its Homeric influences, and Anne Rice’s narrative is no exception. When analyzing the Brat archetype, especially concerning queerness, the Greek hero Achilles becomes the natural starting point. Especially, when it comes to Lestat, there are more than shadows of the Greek warrior in his character. Lestat is, like Achilles, recognized from youth for both his beauty and ruthlessness. Both are prideful characters yet are led by their desire for a man that

simultaneously sparks their journey and whose demise they cause. *Interview With the Vampire* fails to fully form Lestat's queer identity, regardless of how explicit his desire for Louis is, because it does not project his identity as a Brat but as evil. His brattiness is queer and it is Homeric. Young Lestat forms his queerness around Nicolas de Lenfent, his Patroclus, a man who follows Lestat in his quest for something greater – what he thinks he deserves as a being more advanced and curious than those around him – but who suffers the consequences when Lestat's pride becomes bigger than his love.

After being turned into a vampire in Paris, the city the two young boys had run away to together, Lestat's world becomes bigger than Nicki could have predicted. Lestat's turning becomes their Troy, but ultimately it is Lestat's inability to fully let go of him that leads to Nicki's death. Lestat moves on and turns others into vampires, but is unable to let Nicolas die, and his choices drive him into insanity. It is that tragedy that creates the queer Brat archetype. The object of their infatuation must suffer the consequences of their pride. Lestat himself acknowledges this truth when he finds out about Nicki's death. Upon reading the letter that informs him of what has happened, Gabrielle asks him if he wants to go back for revenge. Lestat then responds: "How could I do that? (...) It would be hypocrisy, wouldn't it, when I left Nicolas there counting on them all to do whatever had to be done." (Rice 345) He understands that, even if he did not harm Nicki physically, it is him who caused his death.

George Haggerty (1998) and James Bell (2006) draw a connection between Lestat and another of the great embodiments of the Brat archetype, Dorian Gray. Wilde's and Rice's characters share their pride and their moral descent into hedonistic pleasure gone wrong, both consequences of a greater feeling of contextual decadence. Bell defines this

parallel by stating: “Lestat and Dorian Gray find it expedient, even necessary, to ignore all religious and moral restrictions in their quest for the most refined sensations” (Bell 3) Haggerty goes as far as to label Lestat “The Dorian Gray of our nineties [...]”, however, his radical queerness relies not only on its timeless parallels to the queer narratives that preceded him but his ability to supersede them. Haggerty points out the similarities between the two characters, but one may also name their differences: Lestat is a Dorian Gray who succeeds at remaining youthful and untouched by the somatic consequences of his hedonism. He goes to sleep in darker times and wakes up to become a Rock Star. Lestat presents a hedonistic understanding of life similar to the one expressed by Wilde’s characters, but he expresses it in a way that reads almost like a protest. Throughout *The Vampire Lestat*, this flair towards self-fulfillment through shamelessness proves to be a symbol of pride.

Nina Auerbach acknowledges this connection in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995) when she argues that Anne Rice’s novels contained elements of the nineteenth-century gothic vampirism, and so their decadence gave way to a certain cultural shift. She labels *Ricean* vampires “*amoral aesthetes*” (Auerbach 154), which does not stray far from the Brat concept that Rice herself coins in her works. *The Vampire Chronicles* exists as a meaningful tipping point within vampiric narratives: the conservative *zeitgeist* that surrounded Anne Rice’s work, especially regarding Ronald Reagan’s presidency, bred a sense of dehumanization towards marginalized people that often awakens the vampire as the voice of otherness. *The Vampire Chronicles* represents a response to a new political context and yet also pays homage to the vampiric tradition that came before it.

Auerbach justifies Lestat's overwhelming cultural importance in the big vampiric picture in his capacity to exist in a "spectacular universe of his own" (Auerbach 153). Lestat is all that the vampires before him were, and yet he is something completely new, capable of breaking with the expectations of a reader who knew of vampires as conquerors of the human race. What makes Lestat quite as unique when compared to the rest of his peers is that, in a world where vampirism mirrors queerness, he refuses to be human at all. None of his concerns tie to wanting to be – or appear – human. In fact, his thirst leads him to run after the origins of vampirism and their shared history.

## **2. Vampirism and the Closet**

In her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick dissects the binarism inherent to the concept of 'closetedness'. Sedgwick argues that the idea of being in the closet is a performance of silence, but the mutually exclusive dichotomy between being and not being in the closet does not exist. Everyone exists within a space of both closetedness and being 'out', and each of these phenomena gives the other meaning – the closet exists as long as there is another option, and vice versa. There are several types of silence that are impacted by the discourses around them, and they are as full of meaning as speech is. In the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues:

The fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there is as knowledge. (Sedgwick 4)

Stoker's vampires created a precedent for the relationship between vampirism and closetedness that would eventually evolve into the entirely specific epistemological

question of the vampire's decision to *come out of the coffin* and announce themselves as undead. Vampire literature has integrated secrecy as a trope, and Rice's vampire is no exception. In fact, the correlation between the closet and vampirism is even more overt in *The Vampire Chronicles*, paralleling perfectly for most characters.

In order to understand the way closetedness is presented in *The Vampire Chronicles*, however, one must first understand the theoretical idea of Queer Coding. Historically, queer communities have had the need for a way to express themselves and reach their peers without being spotted by those outside of the culture. A good example of this is the response to the Hays Code, enforced between 1922 and 1945, which censored the content of any motion picture made in North America. The need to convey messages in a way that was hidden gave way to the concept of Queer Coding, a series of visual and spoken messages that allowed queer people to understand while the general public remained unaware of the true intent. The implicit queerness of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century vampire is, on itself, an example of queer coding.

Needless to say, Anne Rice did not write under the rigid guidelines of the Hays Code, but the culture of Queer Coding has remained relevant in the process of creation. There are countless reasons as to why this cultural system has remained in place: from a degree of respect for the legacy of queer art, to the individual need for safety. It is important to state that the queerness in Rice's work is coded, and perhaps her coding responded to a need to transcend the body and the human as we understand it. Rice saw the transcendence of gender as a necessary part of her vampires, and it is that need to exist outside gender boundaries in a way that is assumed, yet never outwardly stated, that

invites the language of Queer Coding into her work. As Rice herself said in a *Vogue* interview, found in Bette B. Roberts' *Anne Rice (1994)*:

She praises the “androgynous allure” that enables him to abolish “gender tyranny” in his film performances and emphasizes the importance of gender transcendence that characterizes her vampires: “if we can preserve that earlier complexity, that mingling of masculine and feminine we hear so exquisitely in the boy soprano, we can have the endless possibilities of it all. (Roberts 51)

*The Vampire Chronicles* exists in an ambiguous state where no explicit description of sexuality is expressed between its characters, and yet it is known to be a pinnacle of queer literature. The coding of Anne Rice's novels was so obvious that certain adaptations of it to film felt the need to sanitize it.<sup>2</sup>

Ken Gelder writes about the coming out narratives within *Interview with the Vampire* in his book *Reading the Vampire* (1994), but in line with the general queer coding of the entire *Vampire Chronicles*, the vampires do not come out as queer at any point in the novels. Nevertheless, they do come out as vampires, in a way that conflates with their individual experiences with gender and sexuality; in fact, Lestat's queerness could be considered radical because of his approach to vampirism itself.

In *Interview with the Vampire*, the novel Gelder focuses on, Rice narrates Louis' process of coming to terms with his own vampirism – his experience with the undead, as well as his experience with his own queerness, is one of guilt and shame. Louis carries the burden of a deeply religious past he cannot reconcile with his new existence as a

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<sup>2</sup> The 1994 movie adaptation directed by Neil Jordan makes some significant changes to the book's plot material in an attempt to tone down the implicit queerness of Rice's vampires. These changes include giving Louis a wife and a child, making their death the reason for his turning into a vampire, and portraying Louis' relationship with Armand as a friendship, among others.



vampire (and consequently, his existence as a gay man living with another man, with whom he shares a house and a child). There is a clear demonization of Lestat by Louis throughout the first novel of *The Vampire Chronicles* that is not questioned until Lestat gets to be the narrator in *The Vampire Lestat*. Louis blames Lestat for making him who he is now, a vampire and a queer man, because he lives his life in a perpetual state of secrecy. When the young boy interviewing Louis asks him about his decision to become a vampire, Louis says, “Decided. It doesn’t seem the right word” (Rice 17). He then explains that, even if he did decide, he thinks Lestat’s words left no other choice, “(...) it was not inevitable. Yet I cannot say I decided. Let me say that when he’d finished speaking, no other decision was possible for me” (Rice 17). Louis insists on his lack of free will, blaming Lestat for his choice to become a vampire.

Louis struggles to come out as a vampire even to himself, and whenever he utters the words, it is always in the shadows, trying to make sure nobody can know who he is. He refuses the most basic vampiric sustenance such as drinking blood, which as previously stated exists as a placeholder for queer sexuality and desire. He loves Lestat, which is seen through actions but never through words; he does not want him to die, yet curses him in every sentence – Louis exists within a prison of his own making, which makes him so radically opposite to Lestat. Perhaps the clearest picture of Louis’s need to remain in the closet, and how vampirism and queerness become one and the same to him, happens right after he gets turned into a vampire in *Interview with the Vampire*, and he refuses Lestat’s request to sleep in the coffin. “I begged Lestat to let me stay in the closet, but he laughed. ‘Don’t you know what you are?’ he asked.” (Rice 26) Louis wants to sleep in the closet rather than a coffin, arguing that it would shield him from the sun just

the same, but Lestat sees this as a denial of his identity. This passage plays with words in a way that reflects Louis and Lestat's opposite experiences with closetedness, since the former is refusing to come out of the closet in more ways than one.

Lestat's laughter at Louis's predicament reads as cruel in *Interview with the Vampire* because it is cruel to Louis – for such a closeted man whose silence expands to the edges of his own internal monologues, being made to exist as a vampire in such a shameless way is an attack. In *The Vampire Lestat*, however, the view of Lestat radically changes. The character that had only been portrayed as the devil now becomes incredibly human and starved for connection. The second novel of *The Vampire Chronicles* provides the reader with a new understanding of Lestat, a more sympathetic one.

Lestat's relationship with vampirism and queerness is radical because he opposes shame from the beginning of his journey, in a way that reminds us of the Brat characters that preceded him. Soon after being turned into a vampire, Lestat meets a religious cult led by the vampire Armand, characterized by their deep belief in the idea that vampirism is a sin and in alignment with the devil. The cult persecutes Lestat and Gabrielle, his mother, to punish them for their transgressions of *the laws*, those rules they live by – which they broke by living openly and freely as vampires. The two of them, by Lestat's call, decide to hide in Notre Dame both as an act of protection and also of defiance – Lestat knows that Armand's cult believes that vampires cannot walk into a church unharmed. He wants to show them the extent of his freedom (and with it, the possibility of their own). Eventually, Lestat lures the cultists into the cathedral. He shows them that their own leader can walk on holy ground without consequence, and when captured, he asks them: “‘Surely you can't endure it.’ I said, struggling. ‘So why do you live among

the dead when you were made to feed on life?”(Rice 210). He tries to point out the existence of silence to the other vampires by presenting them with the idea of being outspoken, paralleling Sedgwick’s ideas. Lestat presents a radically different understanding of vampires to those around him, who have always lived under restrictive rules of shame. Other vampires feel drawn to Lestat precisely because of his rejection of shame regarding his identity, which is to say that Ricean vampires had lived in a self-imposed perpetual closet until Lestat came along. In fact, the mere concept of the closet only exists in the narrative thanks to Lestat’s break from it; other vampires did not acknowledge the existence of this silence because they did not know of another possibility.

Lestat already shocks the reader from the moment he is turned into a vampire. Where the idea of biting and transformation had always been performed as a violent attack on the mortal, Lestat experiences his turning in a completely different way. When he is bitten by his maker, Magnus, this is what he wishes he could say to him: “I love you, I wanted to say, Magnus, my unearthly master, ghastly thing that you are, love you, love you, this was what I had always so wanted, wanted, and could never have, this, and you’ve given it to me!” (Rice 91) Lestat sees vampirism as a blessing and a desire, rather than something he wants to run away from.

Lestat’s approach to closetedness fuels both envy and empowerment in the other vampires, as he becomes the catalyst for so many other stories in the vampire world. For Armand, he becomes the trigger for a centuries-old revenge. He wants Lestat to want him, yet his feelings towards Lestat’s freedom are complicated ones. He envies it, but it also

awakens anger in him, since it contradicts all the rules he has forced himself to adapt to for centuries. When confronted by Lestat, Armand says:

“You who carried our secrets into the limelight (...) We had our Eden under the ancient cemetery,’ he hissed. ‘We had our faith and our purpose. And it was you who drove us out with a flaming sword! What do we have now! Answer me! Nothing but the love of each other and what can that mean to creatures like us!’” (Rice 510)

For others, such as Gabrielle, Lestat’s approach to vampirism becomes the reason for their own freedom. While in life she had been confined to the limits of motherhood, dimming her knowledge and self-expression to fulfill an inherently restrictive role, as a vampire she breaks free from the very ideas of gender and creates a life of her own. When she gets turned by Lestat, she picks her first victim and immediately steals his clothes:

She tore off the pink velvet girdle and skirts right there and put on the boy's clothes. She’d chosen him for the fit of his clothes. And to describe it more truly, as she put on his garments, she became the boy. (...) ‘But there’s no real reason for me to dress that way anymore, is there?’ she asked. (Rice 171-172)

Gabrielle’s first act as a vampire is to let go of the clothes she had worn in life and to adopt the appearance of a young man. She voices how, as a vampire, she has no obligation towards femininity or womanhood. For Gabrielle, Lestat’s outspoken approach to vampirism evidences the silence she had been performing her whole life.

Sedgwick argues that Gothic literature had its own brand of male homosexual panic<sup>3</sup>, the Paranoid Gothic genre. In it, male heroes developed a tight yet murderous relationship with another man that was often accompanied by a supernatural mind

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<sup>3</sup> She uses the concept Male Homosexual Panic to define the systematic manipulation of men through the fear of homosexuality for political reasons (Sedgwick, 1991:186).

connection (Sedgwick 186). While *Epistemology of the Closet* uses *Frankenstein* as its primary example to portray what this genre is, we can find the same outline amongst many similar novels, such as *Interview with the Vampire*. It seems that, while the first novel of *The Vampire Chronicles* is in many ways outwardly queer, it is also plagued with subtle homophobic referencing. The Paranoid Gothic is characterized not by the creation of homophobic sentiment, for that already existed, but as Sedgwick describes it:

The transmutability of the intrapsychic with the intersubjective in these plots where one man's mind could be read by that of the feared and desired other; the urgency and violence with which these plots reformed large, straggly, economically miscellaneous families such as the Frankensteins (...) a residue of two potent male figures locked in an epistemologically indissoluble clench of will and desire. (Sedgwick 187)

This description fits *Interview with the Vampire* perfectly, and yet it does not seem to fit *The Vampire Lestat*. It appears that the story narrated by Louis is the retelling of the dangers of the double-natured male homosocial relationships – one in which the main character is haunted by a monstrous other that uses their relationship against him. But *The Vampire Lestat* does not follow this trope because Lestat, rather than Louis, is the narrator, conveying the perspective of the unapologetic and shameless 'Brat Prince'.

Louis's self-flagellation is a moral imperative from his point of view. He must suffer through vampirism (and queerness) as a way to atone for his inherently sinful behavior. To Louis, shamelessness is not a choice, for it would force him to confront whether he is fundamentally a *good* or *bad* person. It is in this dichotomy that Lestat's hedonistic character results in a proclamation of unashamed queerness. He lives his vampirism openly and freely, precisely because he does not feel the moral shame that Louis lives with. Lestat worries about vampire lineage and creation; his vampiric

concerns are about their shared history and their existence. But he never rejects who he is; he is never concerned with whether there is inherent sin in the creature he has become.

When discussing with Marius the reasons for their existence, Lestat reflects:

But I felt a dark sense of myself as a hungry, vicious creature, who did a very good job of existing without reasons, a powerful vampire who always took exactly what he wanted, no matter who said what. I wondered if he knew how perfectly awful I was. The reason to kill was the blood. (Rice 380)

Even when he ponders whether vampirism makes him evil, he does not assign a moral value to being malevolent or not – instead, he acknowledges the inevitable nature of the way he lives and feeds.

That is perhaps the truth about the most basic correlation between the Brat archetype and radical queerness: in an attempt to signal a complete disregard for moral questions that conflict with their own desires, these characters end up presenting a genuine pride towards their sexuality that is not seen in their peers. Lestat experiences no shame whatsoever in relation to his vampirism and consequently, his relationships.

The nature of the narrators in *The Vampire Chronicles* is, consequently, what triggers either subconscious homophobic bias or radical queer positioning. Louis's silence as a deeply closeted man leads him to internalize the fears of the Paranoid Gothic, and so he tells a story of persecution and entrapment where he has been victimized – not so differently from how Victor Frankenstein narrates his story, as Sedgwick exemplifies. When defining Louis' closetedness through the use of the word 'silence', one must acknowledge that his closet is also created through speech. However, his words are warped around a biased need to justify his actions within his rigid sense of morality. When

the journalist interviewing Louis asks him about his reasons for staying with Lestat, Louis is quick to say he had no choice in the matter:

‘And then there you were’ said the boy after a pause, ‘with another vampire you hated.’

‘But I had to stay with him,’ answered the vampire. ‘As I’ve told you, he had me at a great disadvantage.’ (Rice 35)

This interaction is followed, ironically, by a retelling from Louis of all the things Lestat did *right*. He recalls how Lestat was educated and well-read, how he would indulge him through lavish expenses, and would never disrespect their guests. Even when questioned by the boy about Lestat’s vampirical nature, Louis lets him know that while he did feed on humans, he never harmed or offended their family and friends. This quick opposition of thoughts makes one thing evident: Louis held Lestat in very high esteem, but he has no space for this love in his moral compass; he needs to hide behind a sense of fear and obligation.

While Anne Rice’s works already allude to, and build themselves on, the idea of closetedness, it is worth noting that the 2022 screen adaptation of *Interview With the Vampire* makes sexual politics a more explicit affair. The series makes Louis’ personal struggle with closetedness, as well as his need to make Lestat a monster like the ones in Paranoid Gothic novels, an obvious element of the narrative. For that same reason, it is enlightening to briefly consider some dialogue choices for this dissertation’s purpose, which may aid in understanding the novels’ more subtle referencing to the ideas of closetedness. In the Pilot episode of the series, and after the funeral of his brother Paul, Louis goes to church for confession. The 2022 version of Louis de Pointe du Lac is not a white plantation owner as in Rice’s novel, but a black man in the New Orleans of the

early 1900s. Still, some of his struggles with shame and guilt remain the same, now intensified by the inherent struggle of a black businessman under the Jim Crow laws.

During his confession, he says:

LOUIS: I run to the grift. I run to bad beds. I am...a sodomite, Lord! I laid down with a man. I laid down with the devil and he has roots in me! All his spindly roots in me and I can't think nothing anymore but his voice and his words, PLEASE, HELP ME! I am weak. And I want to die! ['In throes of Increasing Wonder', 57:51 – 58:21]

This insight into Louis's most honest thoughts and fears sheds light on the "male homosexual panic" that Sedgwick describes in her work. It also aids in the understanding of how Lestat's Brat title could potentially make him into a radically queer character. He does not feel the fear that Louis does, and that makes him capable of living freely. After Louis' confession, Lestat kills the Father in the confessional and responds to Louis' previous words:

LESTAT: This primitive country has picked you clean. Shackled you in permanent exile, every room you enter, every hat you're forced to wear. The stern landlord. The deferential businessman. The loyal son. All these roles you conform to and none of them your true nature. What rage you must feel as you choke on your sorrow! ['In throes of increasing Wonder', 1:00:30 – 1:00:55]

The series makes Lestat's unabashed shamelessness, which translates into pride, easier to see for the 21st-century eye – and it refers us to the way other characters describe Lestat in Rice's novels. As Marius says to him in *The Vampire Lestat*: "You don't seek any system to justify [killing] either (...) You're guilty of killing mortals because you've been made into something that feeds on blood and death, but you're not guilty of lying, of creating dark and evil systems of thought within yourself" (Rice 381). These words, both



found in the original novels and their subsequent screen adaptations, showcase the way that Lestat's honesty and rejection of silence make his approach to closetedness inherently radical.

### **3. Disease, Vampires, and the AIDS Epidemic**

Vampires were not born out of fiction, but in fact out of genuine fear. During the seventeenth century, the terror of vampires roaming amongst the living and threatening their existence was a very real fear, becoming even a phenomenon studied and corroborated by the Catholic church and other scholars. Vermeir (2012) studies the way that vampires existed as creatures of the most dreadful imagination, conjuring these monsters as a response to medical realities that the population could not understand. In his article, Vermeir expands on the real consequences of this vampire fearmongering:

In the summer of 2006, Matteo Borrini, a forensic anthropologist from the University of Florence, found the remains of a female 'vampire'. The skeleton was found in a mass grave from the plague of 1576, on Lazzaretto Nuovo, a sanatorium for plague sufferers northeast of Venice. The woman could be identified as a vampire because she had been buried with a brick jammed between her teeth, to prevent her from preying on the survivors. 'Vampires' from the late sixteenth century did not suck blood, but they were hungry. (...) These 'masticating bodies' were believed to be the origin of pestilent diseases that struck villages and cities. (Vermeir 1)

Vampirism, then, was born as the conjuration of the imagination of a terrified populace whose understanding of pestilence was limited. Vampires have always been linked to the idea of disease and contagion, and naturally evolved to take the shape of those vestiges of society that were regarded with the same disgust. The fear of vampires may be a thing of the past, simply because the horrors people were scared of have ended or mutated into

something completely different. At its core, however, it was an anxiety that remains within the psyche of every human: the fear of contamination and otherness. Vampires have always been reborn in virulent contexts: from the plague, to cholera, to HIV-AIDS.

Vampires have been characters of intersections. Where the cisgender heterosexual white man was seen as the default human, the vampire encapsulated everything else. In *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse* (1997), Haraway points out that the vampire “*drinks and infuses blood in a paradigmatic act of infecting whatever poses as pure*” (qtd. in Winnubst 8). The very essence of vampirism is to defile the sanctity of the good, pure man and make him into something else, something that is monstrous by definition. About Haraway’s words, Winnubst writes:

The vampire pollutes all systems of kinship, pollutes all systems of blood, pollutes all systems of race and sex and desire that must be straight. He infects the body and thereby *alters the spirit* – no body can transcend the metamorphoses of his bite, not even the straight white male body that is in the flesh but supposedly not of it. The vampire crosses even these boundaries and, with powers that are transfixing for the rigid self of the white male heterosexual, brings his victims across them as well. (Winnubst 8)

Winnubst acknowledges how the disease associated with vampirism is not just literal but also moral. The vampire bite endangers the existence of the heterosexual white man.

It is no wonder, then, how in a time of crisis by contagion, especially for a disease socially associated with homosexuality, vampirism would mutate around it. When reading *The Vampire Chronicles* within its social and political context, Nina Auerbach hammers on the importance of Ronald Reagan’s presidency and its consequences on the public’s understanding of vampires. In the introduction of her book *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, she states:

“When Ronald Reagan's powerful persona took control of the American imagination in the 1980s, vampires began to die. Intimidated by ideological reaction and the AIDS epidemic, they mutated, as a species, into unprecedented mortality, lacking the tenacity of the Victorian theatrical phantoms they resembled. The best of them took on the holy isolation of angels, inspiring awe in a humanity they could no longer govern” (Auerbach 7)

Anne Rice's vampires are the byproduct of a contextual fear of contamination directed toward the socially undesirable, a title historically aligned with vampirism. In a narrative, such as the one in *The Vampire Chronicles*, where vampirism is seen as a deadly disease intrinsically connected to queerness, the correlation with the AIDS epidemic seems only logical. HIV was (and is) a virus of fluids such as blood, instrumentalized by the Reagan administration to create a moral panic towards queer people and sex workers – sex, blood, and disease became intertwined and then made terrifying to the general public. Paula Treicher's essay "*AIDS, homophobia and biomedical discourse: An epidemic of signification*" (1987) explores the many ways that the American population compartmentalized the HIV epidemic through violent homophobia, such as labelling it “a gay plague” or stating that it was God's punishment towards queer men (Treicher 32-33).

Ian Clark analyzes the correlation between the AIDS epidemic and the 1995 film adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire*. While this version of Rice's work was significantly sanitized of its queer coding and gothic symbolisms, it does still carry a lot of the weight of the original in regards to the fear of contamination. Clark starts his research by establishing that “1994 also saw the release of *Interview with the Vampire*, a horror film which, like HIV/AIDS in popular discourse, is linked inherently with queer male sexuality and the exchange of transformational blood” (Clark 28). The traditional

link between blood drinking and queer desire that had been prevalent in vampire fiction now acquires a new level of significance: queer blood is now tainted and dangerous and, like vampirism, contagious.

Clark analyzes the film's opening scene, which parallels the novel's beginning. Daniel Molloy, a young journalist whose name is not mentioned at all in *Interview with the Vampire*, meets Louis in a bar in what Haggerty defines as “a parody of queer seduction” (qtd. in Clark 29). The scene that follows, however, is not what the audience would expect. Clark writes:

Rather than culminate this innuendo in a sexual encounter, the scene subverts the audience's expectation of explicit queerness with Louis instead “coming out” to Malloy as a vampire. Here, the film establishes its metaphorical entwinement of queerness with lethal infection and archetypal deviancy. (Clark 29)

While perhaps the 2022 eponymous screen adaptation by AMC does a better job at truly encapsulating the double nature of Louis and Daniel's first encounter – in the way that Daniel voices how he had not believed Louis to be a vampire, and had accompanied him home out of a completely different motivation – it is undeniable that *Interview with the Vampire* sets up a precedent for both its intrinsic correlation between vampirism and queerness (especially in regards to the coming out narrative) and also the contextual AIDS epidemic. Auerbach argues that *The Vampire Chronicles* romanticizes a vampire that is eternally beautiful and does not age, but most importantly, who is self-healing as a response to the AIDS epidemic (Auerbach 175). In the age of a political narrative that punished queer sexuality with the promise of bodily and cognitive degeneration, Anne Rice – whether consciously or not – offers a luscious alternative. In Auerbach's own

words, Rice's vampirism is a "heavenly dream to young men suddenly turned mortal" (Auerbach 175).

This narrative empowers Lestat's decision to exist proudly as a vampire even more. While the vampires around him seem to cave under the shame and guilt of their own sin, and he finds that the elders of his species start to deteriorate and become unmoving, he rejoices in his decision to embrace his own nature. *Interview With the Vampire* appears to put Lestat in the position of the predatory queer that aims to infect and manipulate the pious family man, as Clark states:

By characterizing Louis as the masculine, heteronormative ideal corrupted by the distinctly queer Lestat, the film becomes a contemporary parable of the predatory gay man's potential to pervade heteronormative communities, infect healthy bodies, and corrode heterosexuality itself. (Clark 38)

However, *The Vampire* Lestat reverses that expectation and makes Louis' unreliability as a narrator all the clearer. In fact, Lestat's approach to Louis answers a need for community that very well parallels that of the queer community during the AIDS epidemic. As Nina Auerbach states, "to be solitary is to be exposed, to drift towards death" (Auerbach 177). When saying goodbye to Gabrielle, his mother, Lestat seems to confess the existence of this sense of isolation within himself. To her, he says:

'You sense my loneliness,' I answered, 'my bitterness at being shut out of life. My bitterness that I'm evil, that I don't deserve to be loved and yet I need love hungrily. My horror that I can never reveal myself to mortals. But these things don't stop me, Mother. I'm too strong for them to stop me (...) I'm very good at being what I am.' (Rice 355)

The Ricean vampire's obsession with combatting loneliness to the point of madness reaffirms this idea that community is a need for the well-being of these vampires. In fact,

Lestat's words to his mother can be as easily understood as the cry of an ostracized queer man as they are as the sorrows of a vampire. As Herek and Glunt state in the book *AIDS, Identity, and Community: The HIV Epidemic and Lesbians and Gay Men* (1995) on the research conducted on seropositive queer men during the peak of the AIDS epidemic:

One of the most consistent findings in this area of research has been that the availability of social support and satisfaction with it are important predictors of psychological well-being. (...) [Men who are integrated into the gay community] may be more likely than other men to have access to social supports that can meet both instrumental and expressive needs. (Herek and Glunt 58-59)

Community was the only chance for survival for those who had already contracted HIV, and for those who were being directly harmed by the social consequences of Reagan's approach to the crisis. This phenomenon translates to the Ricean vampire's fear of isolation: vampire loneliness is vampire death.

The 2022 screen adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire* makes these facts all the clearer through two of its main world-building topics, for Louis only contacts Molloy again decades after being triggered by the COVID pandemic and an isolation he still cannot pinpoint. Ricean vampires, like all vampires, evolve around disease – Louis, Lestat, and Armand have been reborn in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through yet another context of pandemic, one that, like the AIDS epidemic, intensified the feelings of loneliness and need for peer connection. In the second season of the series, Lestat has his own version of Louis' confession, in which he narrates his own struggles in front of an entirely human audience. While he has always been characterized by a hedonistic persona who did not fear sin or shame, his words during this scene shed light on the only thing Lestat seems to be afraid of both on screen and in Rice's original work: loneliness. During his

confession, Santiago, another vampire in charge of directing the entire scene, decides to intervene to clarify:

SANTIAGO: A word of context for our jury. The single worst thing that a vampire can feel is loneliness. Human loneliness magnified by millennia, by the never-ending road we walk.

LESTAT: Do they not know this?

SANTIAGO: How could they?

LESTAT: Oh. Take my hand. [MAN SOBS] This is loneliness.

SANTIAGO: This is vampire loneliness. [‘I could not prevent it’, 17:32 – 18:11]

Needless to say, vampire loneliness refers us to the isolation caused by times of virulence and pandemic, both in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Once again, the series aids in making the more subtle themes of Rice’s novels into an easily understandable narrative. For the original Ricean vampires, the AIDS epidemic was a catalyst in which loneliness intertwined with the inherent struggles of life as a queer person, and made vampires once again the symbol of humanity’s fears. That makes Lestat’s quest for vampire genealogy and community much more radical – it becomes more than a selfish need to soothe one’s loneliness, and becomes a symbol of the need for mutual aid in the face of death and isolation.

#### **4. Conclusion and Further Research**

The research on *The Vampire Chronicles*, both Rice’s novels and their subsequent screen adaptation, has led to some conclusions regarding the original thesis questions of this TFG. Through the analysis of queer theory, this paper has confirmed the original

hypothesis that Lestat de Lioncourt's character represented a radically queer approach to vampirism. The study of literary vampirical lineage, as well as the political context that surrounds *The Vampire Lestat* have also helped the question of *what* exactly makes these vampires queer without the need for an explicit statement. This research has found that fear seems to be a convergence point in all the themes and metaphors that build the vampire's queer identity.

Sedgwick's analysis of the closet aided this paper in dissecting both Louis and Lestat, and their opposite approaches to fear made the latter's behavior more clearly radical and even political. The reading on vampire history regarding disease and the AIDS epidemic proved that vampires parallel, in many ways, the queer community and linked Lestat's motivation to escape loneliness to the need for community that existed (and continues to exist) amongst LGBTQ+ individuals in times of turmoil.

The aim of this TFG was to focus on the queer representation of Lestat, and the specific ways in which it manifests within *The Vampire Chronicles*. Anne Rice's works (especially some of their screen adaptations) also dwell on the intersectionalities of the characters, such as the effect that their race or gender has on their vampirism. For example, the way Louis is a white plantation owner in the original and a black man in the 2022 adaptation gives his guilt an entirely different tone; something similar happens with Claudia's experience as a black queer woman. Due to the scope of this paper, these topics have not been fully explored and may warrant future research.

The way vampire media has changed and become a sanitized version of the gothic themes discussed in this thesis is also ground for further study. This paper could aid in a comparative work between Anne Rice's novels and early 2000s vampire media,



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focusing on the differences between the treatment of symbolic queerness and fear between heterosexual and queer vampire narratives.

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### Filmography

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