

**The Queer and The Quick:
Review of Lauren Owen, *The Quick***

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**Lauren Owen, *The Quick*.
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The subject of vampires conjures up a variety of cultural associations, accompanied more often than not with a readerly sense of lassitude at their clichéd literary trappings. In choosing to write about the creatures in her debut novel *The Quick* (2014) Lauren Owen makes a bold gesture. The recent vampire tradition has spawned parodies galore, and now that teenage sexual *Angst* has been thoroughly exorcised in novels such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* trilogy (2005-2008), L.J. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* (1991-2011) and Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001-2013), the genre seems ripe for a re-queering which frames sexuality in an innovative way. Owen's novel does not read like an attempt at disposable vampiric fiction; rather it presents an invitation into an intriguing re-imagination of a neo-Victorian supernatural space.

Opening in fin-de-siècle Yorkshire, Owen writes of the privileged, albeit lonesome upbringing of the orphaned siblings James and Charlotte Norbury. Initially focusing on the younger brother, the reader follows James's undergraduate experience at Oxford University. When James moves to London to pursue the carefree lifestyle of a writer, he shares rooms with a vivacious acquaintance, Christopher Paige. The two fall for one another, yet James's accidental association with the mysterious Aegolius Club abruptly terminates their idyllic cohabitation when he is turned into a vampire in a vicious attack in which Christopher is brutally murdered. Although it is never made entirely clear where the Aegolius's motivations

stem from, or exactly why they are so thoroughly evil, this elitist group of male vampires plays a game of cat-and-mouse with the newly “undead” (p. 375) James throughout the novel, culminating in his sister’s delivering him from the grasp of the clubmen.

One might think that vampire novels no longer induce readerly feelings of horror that ought to be associated with the draining of human blood. Rather they have become cultural emblems, meaning each vampire novel published is indebted to its own context, shackled to its historical moment. Clearly the vampire tradition has a documented association with the ideologies surrounding transgressive sexuality (see Stoker 1897 and Stevenson 1988: 139-149), but in Owen’s novel this transgression is made apparent before any mention of vampires even occurs. In her text, this transgression is indeed manifested as homosexuality. Christopher’s brutal murder can be easily construed as a homophobic attack, as his relationship with James has already been exposed at this point in the narrative. Self-consciously, Owen stages the cessation of their relationship (and Christopher’s life) on the threshold of Oscar Wilde’s Chelsea town house. In what could be read as a metatextual allegory, the murderous Aegolius members are aligned with the conservative Marquess of Queensberry as opposed to the morally flexible vampires that readers have come to expect.

So, in a neo-Victorian “revisionary” manner (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4), Owen re-invents a fin-de-siècle queer identity as separate from the discourse of transgression linked to vampire sexuality, while acknowledging at the same time the homophobic discourse of the era and its legacies in our own time: The year 2014 was a milestone for LGBT campaigners with the legalisation of gay marriage in the UK. Speaking on *The Quick* at the Durham Book Festival in October 2014, Owen said that the relationship between James and Christopher was not predetermined, that as she was penning their story she realised that they were romantically associated. Certainly this is present in the tone of the narrative – there is a pleasing naturalness about the fruition of their romance in the first hundred pages of the novel, mirrored in the somewhat more accelerated journey of heteronormative gratification in the final forty pages between James’s sister Charlotte and her fellow incidental vampire-hunter, Arthur Howland. The novel might begin with a queer promise, yet the end sees the predictable amalgamation of realism with the Gothic.

As if sensitive to readers' potential accusations of her vampires' lack of originality, Owen helpfully delineates what her vampires can and cannot do in a self-reflexive list (pp. 144-145). The trappings are acknowledged, but clearly Owen wishes to engage with select characteristics of the creatures. Her vampires have the required immortality and their "magement" (p. 144) is a version of what is either a supernatural ability or a charisma that has been honed in the spanning years of the afterlife. Owen dispels the myth that vampires cannot be seen in a mirror, a motif which has held sway in cinematic projections of these Gothic creatures. Silver and holy water "acts as poison" (p. 144) but, surprisingly, a wooden stake makes no permanent injury. The author includes some innovative substitutes for blood when the vampires are fighting the urge to kill – while there is no sticky synthetic alternative as in Charlaine Harris's *Dead Until Dark* (see Harris 2001: 3), there is "brandy" and, even more pleasing, "hot tea" (p. 176). Owen informs us ostensibly that 'the Quick' is the vampires' term for humans – the equivalent of the *Harry Potter* series's 'muggles', if you like – even though it is the undead who possess heightened strength and speed.

There is a hesitancy to name the vampire throughout the narrative – the 'v'-word functions as an expletive for most of the characters. Just as there is an anxiety about naming the recently-labelled 'homosexuality' in the text, "the Love that dare not speak its name" (Douglas 1990: 10) is paralleled with the unacknowledged supernatural world. This avoidance also manifests itself as self-denial; when defending their relationship to Christopher's brother, James exclaims: "we are *not* depraved" (p. 87, original emphasis). Absolute refusal of this accusation is iterated through James's narrative perspective; just as James does not want to utter the word 'vampire' – he cannot bear to think of his life as a member of the 'undead' or as 'depraved'. Yet traditional heteronormativity was never James's goal – being held captive at the vampiric club stifles his writerly calling as well as his sexuality. The literary conflation of the two is at once ideologically conservative *and* subversive. James is not entirely human, nor is he heteronormative – rather, his queer nature is formed by these two defining aspects of his identity. Of course this is reminiscent of much vampire literature, notably Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2014), which feature the male vampires Lestat and Louis as same-sex parents to the child vampire Claudia. Considering the success of Rice's novels as well as its

queer overtones, one might question the extent to which the homosexual vampire is still transgressive in today's fiction.

James's queer representation has further links to the history of the vampire novel. Sonia Solicari's idea of a neo-Victorian "network of literary citations" is palpable in Owen's novel (Solcari 2013: 180-188). Like Jane Eyre in her red room, James's early life is marked by a significant event of being entrapped:

You passed the ordeal if you didn't scream for help. When the door was shut, it was so close to your face that it felt difficult to breathe. There was no light. It felt as if everyone outside had gone away and there would be no one ever coming to let you out. (p. 11).

This entrapment does not occur in a haunted room, but in a priest's hole. It involves a claustrophobic, bodily restraint, which anticipates a metaphorical emerging from James's closeted sexual life. As in Brontë's Gothic narrative, fire works as a cleansing element at the conclusion of the novel, and a marriage between Charlotte and Arthur brings promise of a brighter (albeit conventionally patriarchal) future. The childhood of James and Charlotte, taking up a significant portion of the early narrative, impresses the profound influence that childhood has in the establishment of a queer sexual identity.¹ James's realisation of his sexuality, when he arrives in London and meets the carefree Christopher, chimes in with the juvenile identity-formation of other neo-Victorian characters like the transgender protagonist in Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005) or Sue and Maud in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002).

The queer is not only manifested in Owen's protagonists, but in the irreverent and hectic structure of the novel. The narrative is told through epistolary passages via unreliable and – in the case of Augustus Mould, the scientist and vampire-killer employed by the Aegolius Club – unlikeable narrators. Homage is paid to Stoker and the sensation fictions of Wilkie Collins in the novel's multiperspectivity, and the author's use of omission sustains intrigue. One of Mould's diary entries reads: "They grow savage at the very end, it seems. ~~The head was almost~~" (p. 138). The decision to provide no further detail seems intended to conjure a gruesome image in the reader's mind.

With a sincere nod to Stoker's vampire hunters, the 'Crew of Light', portions of Owen's narrative are dedicated to pseudo-scientific entries. Owen's acrobatic vampire hunter Adeline Swift features in a sub-plot which follows the safe passage of her and Arthur Shadwell's work-in-progress *The Modern English Vampire* (p. 508). The preservation and dissemination of this encyclopaedic knowledge is paramount to the successful defeat of the Aegolius Cub and the justification of the chroniclers' noble deaths. They function as figures of reason and hope throughout the narrative, much as does Van Helsing in *Dracula*: "I suppose you do not believe in corporeal transference. No? Nor in materialisation. No? Nor in astral bodies. No? Nor in the reading of thought. No? Nor in hypnotism –" (Stoker 2003: 261). Again as in *Dracula*, science and progress provide the Gothic backbone of Owen's plot. Although scientific society at the fin-de-siècle would seek to categorise the novel's protagonist as sexually aberrant, Owen provides an alternative narrative life (and afterlife) in which he can discursively function. Encompassing a well-trodden subject, *The Quick* nevertheless manages to bring a new-fangled facet to the vampire tradition, which can surely be considered 'progress'.

Notes

1. For a fascinating examination of Victorian childhood and queerness, see Bruhm and Hurley 2004 and Kincaid 1994.

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