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# Crystal Palace – Liminal ‘Self’ and Its Projection in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*

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This paper offers an analysis of the liminality of the ‘Self’ and its subsequent projection onto the material world in Anne Rice’s early novels, *Interview with The Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*. The study is focused on two characters of the said works – Lestat de Lioncourt and his long-time companion Claudia – and aims at examining their respective ‘Selves’ as preternatural beings as well as unique individuals. The research draws on Judith Butler’s and Rosi Braidotti’s theories in order to examine the physical, emotional, and mental changes the characters undergo. It subsequently shows that the preternatural ‘Self’ exists in a constant state of non-telic transformation, as well as that the perennial metamorphosis is continuously reflected in the characters’ material homes.

**Key words:** Liminality, projection of ‘Self’, liminal ‘Self’, nomadic becoming, Anne Rice, *The Vampire Lestat*, *Interview with The Vampire*

*Mirror mirror  
Where’s the crystal palace  
But I only can see myself*

Tori Amos, *Winter*

## The Mirror and the Palace

Tori Amos’s song *Winter*, quoted at the beginning of the paper, presents an interesting and vivid allegory of the issue of liminal selfhood and its reflection onto the surroundings in Anne Rice’s early works. Amos’s invocation towards the mirror draws on the symbolism of the Grimm brothers’ 19<sup>th</sup> century folktale, *Snow White*, in which

the mirror of the story is given certain amount of consciousness and personhood as well as the gift of unmasked truthfulness. The Queen defers to it for answers on her beauty. She defers to it in order to see herself acknowledged, validated – in other words, to have her ‘Self’ confirmed.

In Grimm’s fairy tales, the mirror is placed in the position of the Other, separate from the ‘Self’. However, since the mirror’s reflective function is preserved, it serves still as the projection of the Queen’s selfhood onto her immediate environment. It is that reflective quality that Amos emphasises in *Winter* when the persona pleads with the mirror, asking for – or perhaps about – the *crystal palace*. However, in her song, the *palace* becomes equated with the persona’s ‘Self’, which is expressed in the lyrics: “Where’s the crystal palace? But I only can see myself”. These words suggest that looking for, or even looking at the *crystal palace* leads irrevocably and inevitably to seeing primarily one’s own ‘Self’. In addition, the crystal quality of the *palace* suggests it is a fragile construct, easily broken, cracked, and altered. One is, therefore, tempted to ask what the *palace* symbolizes – and in my opinion it becomes a metaphor of the frailty and temporariness of both the identity of a person and subsequently, the frailty of its projection onto the material world.

The said confirmation of one’s ‘Self’ in the surrounding outside is omnipresent in both *Interview with The Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*, exemplified in the character of Lestat and the little girl he transforms into a vampire – Claudia. Moreover, I see them both as exemplifications of the ‘Self’ on the threshold and the perpetually changing ‘Self’. The said liminality refers to the character’s physical bodies, social and gender roles, philosophical constitutions, and psychological states. As for the projection of those onto their surroundings, the manifestation will become vivid in the variety, condition, openness, and aura of the several houses they occupy.

The idea of a constantly changing ‘Self’ has already been investigated and described by numerous acknowledged scholars, for instance Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and Rosi Braidotti. In order to analyse the issue of selfhood in this paper, I follow Judith Butler’s interpretation of *performativity* of gender and attempt to apply it to the ‘Self’. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s statement: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 14). Butler claims that: “woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (45). Furthermore, Butler denies not only the *coherence* and *continuity* of a given gender, but also of a person, calling them “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (23). Viewed from this standpoint, one’s identity – in other words the ‘Self’ – is not “self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent” (22) but rather fluid, elastic, and subjected to change. The same concept of ever-changing selfhood is also represented in Rosi Braidotti’s work entitled “Nomadic Subjects and Metamorphic Others”. In her view, not only does the ‘Self’ recognise a certain multiplicity instead of uniformity within itself (like the acknowledgment of a certain aspect of the other within), but it also allows for a multi-layered dynamic process of becoming. She uses the term *nomadic subject* to denote a person, existing in a constant state of becoming “without fixed targets or destinations (...) punctuated by constant encounters with otherness as a multi-layered and multi-directional landscape” (Braidotti 7). Furthermore, the process of alteration does not happen through “systematic, linear or teleological stages or phases of becoming, each plateau marking instead

a framed and sustainable block or moment of immanently actualized transformations” (Braidotti 8). Anne Rice personifies those ideas into the characters of Lestat and Claudia, undergoing a non-linear, non-telic kaleidoscope of changes, since as vampires, they are forever transfixed in their physical youth and psychological adolescence.

The complexity and liminality of characters is but one facet of the problem. Another is the projection of that complexity onto the material, which I believe is omnipresent in Rice’s Gothic works. The special function of the environment, the landscape that induces heart-wrenching and mind-twisting loneliness has been a conspicuous feature of Gothic literature. Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”, and James’s “The Turn of the Screw” can serve as the most famed exemplifications.

The said specificity has been a popular subject of research as well. In *Gothic*, Fred Botting emphasizes the significance of grave poetry to the development of the genre and cemeteries as Gothic landscapes (21). The ominous quality and uniqueness of the American South has also been the subject of reflection and academic analysis. In her intoxicating memoir, *South and West*, Joan Didion wrote arrestingly about the Deep South, and more specifically New Orleans, where the majority of Anne Rice’s fiction takes place. “In New Orleans in June the air is heavy with sex and death, not violent death, but death by decay, over ripeness, rotting, death by suffocation, fever of unknown aetiology. (...) The atmosphere absorbs its own light, never reflects light but sucks it in until random objects glow with a morbid luminescence” (Didion 5-6). Didion also writes about the omnipresence of wilderness, that invites dread rather than soothing: “The snakes, the rotting undergrowth, the sulphurous light: the images are so specifically those of a nightmare world that (...) I had to steel myself, deaden every nerve” (20-21). She concludes that: “In New Orleans the wilderness is sensed as very near, not the redemptive wilderness of the Western imagination but something rank and old and malevolent, the idea of wilderness not as an escape from civilisation and its discontents but as a mortal threat to a community, precarious and colonial in its deepest aspect” (21-22). As far as the Southern landscape is concerned, Rachel Franks goes even a step further in her study “A Fear of The Dark” by presenting the concept of the Louisiana bayou as not only menacing, but also a distinct character – a Gothic monster. She claims that “for Gothic works setting is systematically elevated (...) until it often achieves the status of being a character in its own right” (2). She subsequently claims that this personification of landscape is common for both Gothic country and urban settings. Finally, in *Gothic Architecture: Sensuality and License at Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill*, Matthew M. Reeve presents the projection of an owner onto a house by analysing Walpole and his celebrated Strawberry Hill (411). New Orleans, described by Anne Rice in *The Vampire Lestat*, serves as a compact reflection of Didion’s, Franks’s, and Reeve’s words. The rich and wild, half-rotting landscape of Rice’s Louisiana becomes as alive and captivating as her characters are – repelling and beguiling the reader in equal measure. Furthermore, as it is with Walpole and the Strawberry Hill, the reflective connection between Lestat and his home(s) is undeniable. However, as neither Lestat nor Claudia are fixed or static in their personality, development or physical prowess, so do their surroundings change with their ever-changing selves – ranging from exotic, flamboyant luxury, and comfort to a filthy, rotting hovel and finally, a tomb deep in the ground.

## New Orleans Others

As described in *Interview with The Vampire*, Lestat, Claudia, and their companion Louis spend about 65 years together in 19<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans. What interests me most about it is Lestat's specific mental, emotional, and physical state and behaviour within that period. Lestat, Louis, and Claudia were companions, quasi-platonic lovers, but they also constituted a variation of a family, both traditional and modern in its varied aspects. Their city home offered them safety and enough anonymity to pass for humans and their day-to-day (or more accurately night-to-night) lives were filled with comfort, satisfaction, and luxury.

Nonetheless, their vampiric nature placed them on the margins of the society wherever they went and taunted them with alienation from all forms of human contact and intimacy. As preternatural vampires, neither dead nor fully alive, they were what Julia Kristeva considered the *abject*. In her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay of Abjection*, Kristeva stated: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (4). There is little doubt that vampires belong neither to the realm of godly creatures (as opposed to angels or humans viewed through the Judeo-Christian lens) nor the realm of science. Kristeva further equated the abject with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

Anne Rice's vampires terrified, repelled, and at the same time, lured and seduced. Lestat was aware of this dichotomy and yet he fought this *self-abjection* with a grand plan to coin a human-like family. His home life with Louis and Claudia is described in lyrical, mesmerizing language. They lived in a townhouse in New Orleans that "harboured them in luxury" (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 434), where they "moved amid the lacquered furniture and the darkening oil paintings and the brass flowerpots as living beings should" (436). The tone of the description of their days is nostalgic, and full of yearning: "the times we walked together and talked together, acted Shakespeare together (...) or went arm in arm to hunt the riverfront taverns or to waltz with the dark-skinned beauties of the celebrated quadron balls" (435). The comfort of "having them on my terms" (434) as Lestat describes his relationship with Claudia and Louis is accentuated by his repetitive professions of love towards both characters. He speaks of the "phenomenal" longevity of their bond and the "eerie contentment" (435) they shared "in those nineteenth-century decades when the peacock colours of the ancient regime died out and the lovely music of Mozart and Haydn gave way to the bombast of Beethoven (...)" (435). The beauty and tranquillity of their home is a reflection of the magnificent physical appearance and the affection of the three.

The destruction of Lestat's home by arson goes hand in hand with his physical devastation caused by Claudia's cunning attack. Claudia is the one that poisons Lestat with absinthe and laudanum, then cuts him and leaves him to bleed almost to his death. Hence, Claudia is the one, who smashes the proverbial *mirror*, the seemingly safe and remote *crystal palace* of Lestat's as well as his selfhood as he knows it. Claudia becomes equated with the trauma that has the potential to free the 'Self' from its own binds and offer it a chance to attain another role.

## The Underworld of the ‘Self’

The demise of Lestat’s flamboyant, mischievous ‘Self’ is mirrored by the demise of his 19<sup>th</sup>-century elegant, bourgeois palace-like home. This situation is reminiscent of the final destruction of the Usher family mansion in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher”, when Roderick’s death and the literal collapse and destruction of his house occur simultaneously, as if one was a reflection of the other.

Lestat survives Claudia’s attack and the literal and metaphoric fall of his house. Nonetheless, he is badly wounded and lessened to a “hideous and crippled monster (...) antithesis of the romantic demon” (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 437). His physical appearance changes dramatically – no longer angelically beautiful, nor ostentatiously dandy, he wears “a greatcoat with a muffler hiding my gaunt face. I wore gloves to hide my skeletal hands” (443). He calls himself “a skeleton with bulging eyes” (444). What is striking in these passages is Lestat’s physical similarity to Roderick Usher. Roderick, although undeniably human is described as having: “A cadaverousness of complexion” (Poe 49) that after the death of his sister Madeline acquired “if possible, a more ghastly hue” (58).

However, this degradation is not limited to his physical appearance. The devastation to his ‘Self’ is complete and its impact is visible on Lestat’s physical form, mental capability, and emotional behaviour. His sophisticated taste, dignity, and nonchalance are gone as well. He has no command over his voice or composure; he is confused, weak, and afraid. The once “aristocratically aloof, unfailingly elegant” (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 436) vampire’s body is covered in “too numerous, too intricate scars” (438), his hands tremble, he cannot push back his tears when he speaks. After his return to New Orleans from Paris, where he unsuccessfully pleads for the vampire Armand’s help, Lestat concludes: “My vision and thoughts were getting ever more clouded” (443). With his progressing agoraphobia and misophonia he soon confines himself to just one room of the house, where he reads obsessively. He also experiences visions and hallucinations. The story of Lestat’s fall from the exotic, luxurious pedestal he placed himself upon in the years spent with Louis and Claudia to his physical, emotional, and mental demise serves as a poignant metaphor for human clinical depression. Pete Remington analyses it in detail in his paper ‘You’re Whining Again Louis’: Anne Rice’s Vampires as Indices of the Depressive Self”, by examining Lestat’s, Louis’s, and Armand’s behaviour in the light of contemporary psychology using the DSM IV diagnostic manual. He concludes that Lestat displays traits of manic-depressive disorder (Remington 87). After losing this predatory beauty, suffering physical trauma, mental incapacity, loneliness, and depression, all he is left with is the persona of a living corpse cursed with consciousness. He is a dead body, a corpse animated with the power of the spirit Amel, who constitutes the essence of vampiric life. In this way, Lestat is both dead and alive as his home seems to be. The weakness of this persona is mirrored so spectacularly in the gradual yet continuous fall of the second of his homes – the house on Prytania Street.

As his shelter, he selects one of his “empty old mansions with rotting white columns and sagging porches” (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 443) on Prytania Street, steps away from the La Fayette Cemetery. After the sheer destruction of his cherished townhouse, the property on Prytania Street becomes the new reflection of Lestat’s



degraded, shattered selfhood. It is a derelict house, rid of furniture, falling deeper and deeper into disrepair as years go by. The house's demise is parallel to Lestat's physical degradation and its seeming emptiness a metaphor of a void in Lestat's heart after Claudia and Louis's betrayal and assault. With his neglect and abandon the house becomes more and more a nightmarish old ruin, conquered by the menacing Southern wilderness: "The rain had bled down from leaks in the roof and melded the books together like papier-mache bricks. (...) And I knew all the rooms in the house were walled in books like this" (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 444). The house also represents Lestat's vampiric body – weak, scarred, and destroyed yet still not quite dead. As in Lestat's undead body there is still activity that animates the house – Lestat filling it with books, the vermin investing the property, the lush flora of the exotic Deep South. The piles of books Lestat reads compulsively can be seen as a metaphor of the never-ceasing cascade of his feverish thoughts, piling in his head without structure. The rats that have become his primary food together with the overgrowing wisteria and morning glory become the allegory of Amel, inspiring Lestat's bodily frame. Notable is also the fact that Amel, as presented in one of the sequels to *The Vampire Lestat* is a menacing, predatory presence, taunting humans and depriving them of rest. As the mundane vermin infest and animate Prytania Street, so does this celestial rodent possess and animate Lestat. This way the house on Prytania Street becomes a clear, vivid mirror reflection of Lestat's condition as a being on the threshold between life and death. In 1929, Lestat finally buries himself underneath his house where he falls into a deep sleep, lasting till his *resurrection*, as he calls his re-appearance amongst the people of New Orleans in 1984.

## Comeback and Ascension

Lestat figuratively *comes back from the Underworld* after 56 years of semi-sleep, physically buried underneath his Prytania property. The act is symbolic, reminiscent of the *descensus ad inferos* mythical motif widespread in the Fertile Crescent region and Ancient Greece, a story centered around a god(dess) or hero(ine) descending into the Underworld and ascending back to Earth in a quest for power, knowledge or a loved one (Stuckey, "Inanna's Descent to the Underworld" 2-3).

Mircea Eliade (47-51) sees restorative power in the act of *descensus ad inferos* – the hero returns to life reborn, renewed, and healed. Rice's tale of Lestat's *descensus* offers a southern Gothic variation of the motif. Lestat emerges back to the surface of the Earth with his undead body healed, magnificent again, and stronger than ever before. His *joie de vivre*, his particular flamboyant behaviour and refreshing sense of humour are back as the world around him mirrors this change of his self again: "The dark dreary industrial world (...) had burnt itself out (...). People were adventures and erotic again the way they'd been in the old days, before the great middle-class revolutions of the late 1700s. (...) Once again, they costumed themselves in velvet and silk and brilliant colours if they felt like it. (...) The old aristocratic sensuality now belonged to everybody. It was wed to the promises of the middle-class revolution and all people had a right to love and to luxury and to graceful things" (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 7). Lestat emerges ready to be enamoured again and soon enough he finds new companions with whom he starts a rock band and new adventures.

His new vivacity, hunger for fame and success, his new zest for life unsurprisingly wrought him out of his lair on Prytania Street. His renewed glamour and exuberant selfhood are projected again onto his nearest environment – his household. Not confining himself to one, Lestat switches between “a lovely old plantation house North of New Orleans” and “a luxurious ranch house in Carmel Valley” (453). The latter bears witness to his reunion with Louis and the rekindling of their relationship.

It may seem this reunion heralds a somewhat standard *happy ending* for Lestat. However, both his selfhood and its projection onto his surroundings never ceases to alter and evolve throughout the *Vampire Chronicles*, though not in a linear, or even sinusoidal fashion. Lestat’s existence does not know the bounds of time, death or aging, which makes him quintessentially deprived of his *telos*. As such a creature, he *becomes* the embodiment of Braidotti’s *nomadic becoming*.

### Another ‘Other’ – Claudia’s Room in *Crystal Palace*

Claudia’s transformation into a vampire as well as her death are both described in the *Interview with the Vampire*, with *The Vampire Lestat* briefly mentioning her in the epilogue. Although Rice has focussed substantially less on the development of Claudia’s character than on Lestat’s, I believe it is worthwhile to acknowledge the profound liminality of her selfhood as well.

As Lestat’s creation, his vampire-child, she is essentially the effect of the dichotomy of his character and nature and the very embodiment of a being on the threshold. The story of Claudia’s fate resembles an inverted *Beauty and the Beast* tale. Like *Beauty*, the lovely orphaned child is snatched by a monster and kept in his remote abode with no interaction and connection to humans – only magical beings populate her *crystal palace*. However, Rice’s is not a story about the conquest of kindness, culture, and civilisation manifested by *Beauty* taming and re-humanizing the *Beast*. Claudia does not *tame* Lestat, she does not save him in any way. In this modern tale, there is no all-healing, magical first kiss that restores the *Beast* to his previous human form, thus marking the transformation of his ‘Self’ and his life. The first *kiss* that Lestat, beguiled with Claudia’s beauty, frailty, and innocence offers her is the *Dark Trick*, as he terms the making of a new vampire, which deprives her of her humanity, yet bequeaths her with the hunger, yearning, strength, and lustre of a murderous, man-hunting little beast. In time her bestiality proves to be greater than that of her vampiric fathers – Louis finds her less human than they could have ever dreamt, with no “sympathies of the human existence” (Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* 136). Claudia is, thus quite literally made monstrous, metamorphic (Braidotti 4) and, to paraphrase Marina Warner’s words, she joins the league of women and children, embodying “extreme female aberration” alongside Euripides’s *Medea* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (10). Lestat names her bitterly “the evil of my evil” (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 436). In this manner Claudia, from the *Beauty* of the story – the innocent tiny *damsel in distress* – becomes another villain.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of

<sup>1</sup> Angela Carter offered a similar inversion of the traditional tale in her short story *The Tiger’s Bride*, when it is *Beauty* who transforms into an anthropomorphic beast: “And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world,

Claudia not morphing into yet another Belle are numerous. She denounces traditional Western femininity by becoming one of the monsters. Secondly, she belies the idealistic image of an innocent child, prevalent in contemporary Western culture, as described by Marina Warner: “the child and the soul are somehow interchangeable and that consequently children are the keepers and the guarantors of humanity’s reputation” (46). Furthermore, by assaulting her male companion and father-figure, she asserts herself as Lestat’s peer, his equal, which Louis, a man himself, was not able to achieve. At the same time, like Belle to the Beast, Claudia is Lestat’s love and possesses the capacity to break his heart. Contrary to what Belle does in the traditional Grimm version of the story, Claudia decides to use this power – “Claudia was my dark child, my love, the evil of my evil. Claudia broke my heart.” (Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* 436)<sup>2</sup> Claudia is, therefore, able to adjust to her circumstances of being held captive by a metamorphosis akin to transubstantiation, that allows her to reclaim her power as the one who triumphs over her captor. Hence, to paraphrase Braidotti’s words, by becoming the *metamorphic other* she manifests her power and resilience. She has become one of those who have “already been through their accident or catastrophic event, they live with their trauma and have come out at the other end. If not quite survivors, they are at least resilient in their capacity to metamorphose and thus survive and cope” (4).

And lastly, the character of Claudia offers an exemplification of a very intricate, complex liminality of selfhood. She is a dead corpse, animated by the vampiric blood, but also a living being bestowed with intelligence, reason, and powerful emotions. She is at the same time a sage (around 71 years of age, six years a human and 65 a vampire) and a little girl, entrapped forever in a pre-pubescent six-year-old childlike body. Kristeva stated that the abjection reaches its peak, when death interferes with a stance that, in our culture, is associated with safety, even serenity – which is childhood (4). Claudia is therefore an example of an object far more complex and profound than any other of Anne Rice’s vampires due to her entrapment in a little child’s undead body.

Her uniqueness also lies in the fact that she is an orphan, deprived of her biological family, but at the same time has two father-figures, one of whom – Louis – is also her brother *in blood*, also being made a vampire by Lestat.

Subsequently, what adds to her ‘Self’s’ liminality is her *sui generis* androgyny. Several of Anne Rice’s characters display certain traits of genderlessness, or at least personality traits traditionally associated with the opposite sex, however, Claudia’s situation amongst them is one of a kind. As she was only six years old when made a vampire and her body never attained puberty, one could argue that she has never grown into her full femininity, and is therefore, not only not a woman, but almost genderless. Amongst the Others that vampires are, she represents the ultimate ‘Other’ – Another ‘Other’. For that reason, I believe she requires a special *room of her*

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and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur” (Carter 45).

<sup>2</sup> This equation of Lestat’s and Claudia’s statuses as peers is again analogous to Angela Carter’s portrayal of Beauty, who also asserts herself as the Beast’s equal, not only through her physical metamorphosis, but also by her defiance of him, her maintaining and executing her own free will, and the power she gains to instil fear in him: “He went still as stone. He was far more frightened of me than I was of him” (Carter 44).



*own* – a distinct subcategory of the ‘Self’. Certainly, adhering to de Beauvoir’s and Butler’s theories, one could as easily call Claudia a woman, or at least a vampiric woman since that was the role she was *performing* as Lestat and Louis’s companion and daughter. However, I believe that would be an oversimplification of the issue for reasons I have already stated, as Claudia belies both the stereotypical portrayal of an obedient, innocent child and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century delicate, submissive woman. Her being and not being a woman adds to her station as being and not being alive, being young and old at the same time. In that Claudia resembles the Ugaritic goddess Anat, the half-sister and lover of Baal, who existed in perpetual state of adolescence, never acquiring the status of a true woman, but instead enjoying more freedom, self-assuredness, and power (Stuckey, “Goddess Anat Warrior Virgin of the Ancient Levant”). Claudia, in a similar manner, is immortal and yet in constant state of becoming, she trespasses borders of her humanity, age and gender.

## Claudia and Lestat – the ‘Other’ Meets ‘Another’

Claudia’s and Lestat’s influences upon one another seem impossible to overestimate, as they initiate each other into new spheres of the ‘Self’, he – by making her a vampire thus changing her very substance, she – by becoming the embodiment of his trauma as her assault puts him on the threshold between his peculiar vampiric existence and complete annihilation. Hence, they bequeath each other with complete physical, emotional, and mental transformation, secondary only to death.

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