



# *There's No Romance in Bloodlust.*

*Oliver LaRose*

I have always loved vampires. When I was little, my favorite *Sesame Street* character was Count von Count, and I grew up with the intense love stories in shows and movies from the 1990s and 2010s. I loved the pull between passion and forbidden romance between Buffy and Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and I was obsessed with Edward's protection of Bella to win her over in *Twilight*.

The summer after my freshman year of college, I wanted to read *Interview with the Vampire*. I craved the melancholic romanticism of vampire stories that I knew, and I wanted to spend my summer break immersed in my favorite media. What I did read, however, disturbed the image of vampires I held in my head. The relationship between the main characters, Lestat and Louis, is indeed romantic, but it is also perverse and coercive. Louis owns enslaved people. The vampire Lestat falls in love with Louis and turns him into a vampire so they can be together forever. Lestat then keeps Louis dependent on him. He emotionally manipulates Louis and isolates him from any outside relationships. One time Louis tries to separate himself, and Lestat turns a dying five-year-old girl named Claudia into a vampire to serve as their daughter and make Louis stay.

Claudia grows up to be an adult woman with her own sexuality, but due to being turned when she was little, she is stunted in a body that will never match her maturity. Claudia's sexual independence and dignity are stripped by what Lestat does to her. Claudia's story disgusts me, but I recognize myself in her. Real life predators hurt girls in ways that stunt them like Claudia. The way that men have talked to me, looked at me, and forced themselves onto me has prevented me from developing my own sexual autonomy without their influence. As I look back on my previous understanding of vampires and see them through my lived experience, I realize that I prefer vampires to be disturbing because what they represent is disturbing. Vampires were treated as disturbing in older media, but newer American films turned their predation into charm. American film lost the classic understanding of the monstrosity of vampires.

*Interview with the Vampire* was a pivotal moment for my own perception and understanding of the perverse predation of vampires, but even I could tell that Rice's message was misheard by the producers of the 1994 film adaptation. Louis, Lestat, and Armand were played by Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise and Antonio Banderas, and they all wore makeup with wardrobes that ranged from intricately detailed suits with dainty cravats to nearly sheer, low-cut linen shirts that displayed their muscular, hairy chests.

Before I read *Interview with the Vampire*, I had known vampires to be lonesome, brooding lovers. In the first *Twilight* film, Bella learns that Edward is nonhuman when he saves her by stopping a van with a single arm. No human has the speed and strength to stop an oncoming vehicle, and she becomes obsessed with finding out what makes him so different. Edward is afraid of revealing himself to Bella. However, when Bella confronts him about knowing he is a vampire, she is not frightened by him. She instead presses him and says his vampire being does not matter to her. There is no true danger to Edward because Bella knows he will not use his powers against her. He may be a monster, but he has been defanged.

In Francis Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Count Dracula, played by '90s Hollywood heartthrob Gary Oldman, appears as both beast and man. He feeds off Johnathan's blood, invades England with plague rats, and harnesses an interchangeable form of a human-sized bat. His nostrils flatten against his face, his ears point upwards, and wiry fur covers his whole body. And yet, in his human form, he wears a fitted grey suit, his hair is well groomed, and his voice is soft.

Dracula's prey, Mina, is initially scared of his vampirism and remains loyal to her fiancé, but she eventually falls in love with him. In the film, Mina is Dracula's lost love, and she wholly embodies that identity. Mina knows that she is with a dangerous figure, but she offers her neck for Dracula to feed on. She asks him to turn her into a vampire so they can love each other forever. Mina and Dracula are lovers. Dracula cares about her and desires gentle intimacy.

The film's source material, however, holds a very different story. Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* showcases the Count as a predator. Count Dracula is nowhere near attractive—his pale, wrinkled skin is cold to the touch, his eyebrows and mustache are messy and ungroomed, his fingernails and teeth are unnaturally long and sharp. His clothes, rich red fabrics ordained with gold embroidery, do nothing to hide his inhuman nature. Turning Mina into a vampire requires a blood ritual. In the book, he spreads her wrists apart and forces his fangs into her throat, while simultaneously holding her mouth to his chest, leaving her no choice but to swallow his foul blood flowing from a wound there.

In the film, in contrast, Mina begs Dracula to participate in the ritual. In the book, Dracula drains her blood, dignity and autonomy away from her. She never shakes the emotional effects of the violating ritual. Count Dracula takes a part of herself away and leaves shame behind. Mina's dignity drained from her is a story that I know all too well. No matter how many honest people wanted to protect me, they could never replace the part of myself that was forcibly taken from me.

The 2024 film *Nosferatu* accurately portrays vampires as abusive, coercive, and murderous. Count Orlok is not only pale; he is a corpse with decaying skin and maggots crawling out of open sores on his body, only concealed by his fur coat that drapes to the floor. He has a thin patch of stringy hair that falls over one side of his head and a mustache that hides his yellowed fangs. His fingernails, too, are extremely long and dirty. The viewer first meets Count Orlok in his castle. Solely illuminated by candles and firelight, his breath curls around his hooked nose.

The main character, Ellen, calls upon a companion when young and meets *Nosferatu*. He takes advantage of and deceives her, threatening suffering, plague and death upon her if she finds another partner. Throughout the film, Ellen is plagued by nightmares and convulsions that can only be explained through her cursed bond to Orlok.

When Ellen tries to leave him, Count Orlok kills people she loves. He believes that he is her rightful husband and will kill everything around her until she is his again. He forces Ellen to make a decision: either she can allow everything to be killed around her, or she can renounce her marriage to Thomas. She chooses the latter, not out of love or willingness. She does so to end *Nosferatu*'s plague and is coerced into draining herself.

Count Orlok feeds on Ellen's blood, biting into her chest through her ribcage with a wet crackling sound. Bugs crawl out of his decomposing skin. Blisters and sores glisten through the moonlight out of the window. As Orlok drinks her blood, he glugs and sputters it all across the bed.

When the sun comes up, Orlok's body is burned to nothing but a skeleton over Ellen. Her dead body is splayed on the bed with blood soaking the linens, dripping to the floor. She is drained of everything. *Nosferatu* very explicitly shows the abuse that coercion really is. Count Orlok is a specter of parasitism. Ellen never truly has a choice between allowing everyone around her to die or going to Count Orlok; she would lose everything if she didn't let him drain her.

Ellen has no autonomy, no dignity, no real choice.

Vampirism is not pretty clothes, pretty faces, and supernatural charm. Vampirism is the disgusting display of hunger and the abuse of power to remove everything the victim has. Mina may have survived *Dracula* in the book, but she is left traumatized and forever missing a part of herself. She is never able to live her life again without the constant influence and trauma that *Dracula* has caused her.

I live in a world with the constant reminders, trauma or influence from the men who propositioned me, pushed me, and forced me. There can be no solace in keeping my blood if I have my dignity and autonomy drained from me. I see myself in Claudia because she grew up stuck in the body of the young girl who had everything stripped from her. I grew up in a body that feels foreign to me and will always somehow betray me. There is no beauty in the parasitism of vampires, there is no romance in coercion.

Cover image credit, *Nosferatu*, eine Symphonie des Grauens, F. W. Murnau, Germany 1922, 81 min., 16mm, accessed through the George Eastman Museum, <https://www.eastman.org/nosferatu>



**Oliver LaRose** is a published science writer with over three years of professional experience in multimedia journalism, technical writing, and marketing. While most of his journalistic pieces thus far have focused on food and science, he loves to use writing as an avenue to talk forever about his passions (in this case, vampire movies). In his free time, he likes to play his violin, read science magazines, and collect stuffed marine animals. Oliver hopes to land a career in wildlife conservation and science education through writing, where he can directly help sea otters and harbor seals in pacific kelp forests.