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Violent Affection:
Romanticized Violence in Anne
Rice's *Interview with the
Vampire*

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Abstract

Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) reshaped the vampire genre by combining Gothic horror with BDSM elements. The novel explores the tension between aesthetics and ethics, where violence is presented as both intimate and seductive. Key relationships, such as between Louis and Lestat, show power dynamics defined by submission and control. These dynamics are expressed through vivid, sensual language, adding emotional depth to the story. Rice's portrayal of violence reflects themes from her earlier BDSM fiction, where pain and pleasure are linked to identity and guilt. The novel shifts vampire fiction from traditional horror to emotional and erotic complexity. A central theme is audience complicity, where both the characters and readers become part of the violent spectacle. They romanticize or overlook the true cost of violence. By integrating BDSM into mainstream fiction, Rice paved the way for other works to explore similar themes. Her influence is seen in how vampires are portrayed in literature and popular culture. *Interview with the Vampire* continues to shape the genre, challenging traditional views of vampires and violence.

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I. Introduction

“Do you mean for you it was an aesthetic choice, not a moral one?” (Rice 67). This question, posed by the human interviewer to the vampire Louis, encapsulates a central tension in Anne Rice's novel: the distinction between aesthetics and ethics in representations of violence. It suggests that the vampire's actions are not morally justified but are experienced, and perhaps legitimized, through beauty, desire, and form. The question prompts readers to consider whether the vampire's allure lies in his ability to transform suffering into art, and whether this transformation invites us to overlook or even romanticize moral transgression. It introduces a narrative in which brutality is consistently mediated by beauty and in which the aesthetics of violence evoke a disturbing empathy.

The romanticization of violence refers to portrayals that make cruelty or suffering emotionally seductive or aesthetically beautiful. Rather than presenting violence as entirely horrific, some narratives infuse it with moral complexity, sensual detail, or sublime grandeur, encouraging readers to sympathize with perpetrators or to find beauty in brutality. This tendency is especially evident in Gothic literature, where terror and beauty often coexist. From early Gothic works such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, audiences have taken pleasure in fictional horrors. As Edmund Burke observed in the eighteenth century, there is a “delight” in terror that defies simple explanation (22). Gothic authors explore this paradox by portraying violence as both fearsome and alluring, blending pain and pleasure in ways that engage the imagination (Clery 80).

Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) is firmly rooted in the Gothic tradition. The novel follows Louis de Pointe du Lac, a guilt-ridden vampire who recounts his life story to a human interviewer. Through Louis's memories, the narrative presents vampiric violence as both intimate and performative, blending suffering with seduction. At the centre of this exploration are relationships marked by domination and submission, particularly between Louis and his maker Lestat, and between Louis and the child-vampire Claudia. These dynamics, along with the novel's homoerotic undertones and BDSM-inflected elements, frame violence as a form of emotional and erotic connection.

Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* has been widely studied for its Gothic themes, with scholars often focusing on issues of gender, morality, and the portrayal of the vampire as a tragic figure. However, there remains a notable gap in the scholarship regarding the novel's aestheticization of violence and the role of characters such as Louis and the interviewer as passive spectators or complicit observers. While existing research often analyzes the

emotional and philosophical struggles of the vampire characters, it rarely addresses how the narrative presents their inaction or detachment in the face of violence (Linkin, Haggerty, Ikawati). This oversight limits our understanding of how the novel implicates these characters in the acts they claim to resist. In addition, Rice's use of BDSM elements, particularly in the power dynamics between vampires and their victims, has not been fully examined within the context of vampire fiction. This is especially relevant given her explicit exploration of these themes in later works like *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*. A closer look at these aspects can offer new insights into the novel's treatment of consent, control, and the eroticization of violence. This blending of violence and sensuality, which is central to both Rice's erotic fiction and her vampire narrative, has not been adequately addressed in the literature. James Bell's essay "Decadence, Dandyism and Aestheticism in The Vampire Chronicles" gestures toward these themes Bell's analysis primarily focuses on *The Vampire Lestat*, the second novel in the series, rather than *Interview with the Vampire*, leaving the aestheticization of violence in the first novel underexamined.

This essay argues that *Interview with the Vampire* romanticizes violence by blending Gothic aesthetics with erotic subtexts, transforming predation into emotionally charged spectacles. Rice uses the charismatic antihero and lyrical language to aestheticize violence, while the human interviewer and the Théâtre des Vampires scene position the reader as a passive spectator to brutality. I will examine how Rice incorporates BDSM themes in *Interview with the Vampire* to deepen the novel's exploration of guilt, submission, and control. In doing so, I will also compare *Interview with the Vampire* to later vampire narratives such as *Twilight* to highlight how Rice's treatment of power and desire anticipates or diverges from contemporary representations of similar themes. This will highlight the ethical complexity of romanticized violence in Rice's fiction and its lasting influence on modern romance.

II. Gothic Aesthetics and the Seduction of Suffering

To understand Rice's romanticized portrayal of violence, it must be situated within the Gothic aesthetic tradition, which renders suffering seductive. Gothic literature, emerging in the late 18th century with works like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, and later exemplified in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, is grounded in the notion that terror can be pleasurable and even exquisite when experienced at a safe remove (Clery 53). Early critics struggled to explain the public's appetite for tales of dread, yet rather than indicating depravity, this fascination with

fictional violence was viewed as a psychological need (Burke 15). Edmund Burke argued that ordinary life induces a “torpor,” a stifling boredom, prompting individuals to seek out intense emotions for stimulation (15). Supernatural horrors and high-stakes danger in Gothic narratives fulfil this need. In both *The Castle of Otranto* and *Dracula*, terror is experienced from a safe distance, allowing readers or viewers to enjoy the thrill of danger without real risk. As a result, violence becomes a paradoxical blend of horror and pleasure: the audience feels the emotional intensity of violence, but also the satisfaction of seeing it safely resolved (Burke 34). This dynamic, central to Gothic narratives, seduces through suffering, packaging mortal terror as an aesthetic high, offering a “combination of pain...and delight” that reaffirms one’s sense of existence (110).

Chivalric romance and earlier literary traditions also contributed to the romanticizing of violence. Medieval romances glorified violent quests and trials as pathways to honour and love: knights slew dragons or duelled rivals to prove their virtue, framing violence as noble (Sposato and Claussen 99). Gothic fiction could be read as also having this lens but with a twist: the charisma once reserved for heroes was shifted to villains and Byronic antiheroes. The attractive male villain became a Gothic staple, such as Byron’s Manfred, evoking what one critic calls a “perverse attraction to a threatening force” in both readers and characters (Diplacidi 54). In other words, Gothic tales often present evil or danger as magnetically alluring. The typical Gothic antagonist is mysterious, powerful, and charismatic, evoking both fear and fascination. Readers are drawn to these dark figures, reflecting how Gothic heroes feel both terror and awe toward the villain (54). This dynamic sets the stage for Rice’s Lestat, who follows the tradition of the alluring Gothic antihero: an aristocratic vampire whose “sheer beauty” Louis finds “spellbinding” despite himself (Rice 20). Lestat exudes the old-world charm of an attractive villain, making his cruelty strangely compelling.

Another hallmark of Gothic narrative is its emphasis on individual desire and transgression of social norms. Jenny Diplacidi observes that Gothic fiction often prioritizes “individual choice and desires” over law or tradition (213). Characters defy taboos, pursue illicit love, vengeance, or occult power in the name of personal longing or anguish (213). This focus on personal desire means Gothic violence is rarely random or senseless: it is often charged with emotional intensity. Rice inherits this tradition by making her vampires’ violence deeply personal and passionate. Every kill or act of brutality in *Interview with the Vampire* is fraught with meaning, functioning as a form of communication as much as predation. Lestat kills with theatrical flair, reflecting his self-indulgent personality. Louis kills reluctantly and mournfully, his violence entangled with guilt and existential despair. Claudia’s violence carries a child’s petulant cruelty and frustration as she seeks control in a

world that treats her as a doll. In Rice's work, each violent scene expresses character and desire, not merely gore. This aligns with what Yoshitaka Inoue calls the "introspective vampire" mode of the 20th century, epitomized by Louis narrating his anguished history (90). Unlike earlier literary vampires, Louis's self-aware suffering adds psychological depth to the violence we witness. The novel thus continues the Gothic tradition of using supernatural violence to externalize inner turmoil and forbidden desires.

Rice also reworks Gothic tropes by blending them with a richly aesthetic style, elevating vampire violence to an art form. In folklore, vampires were often corpse-like, resembling zombies or predatory beasts (Inoue 84). In *Interview with the Vampire*, the crude, monstrous traits of folklore are replaced by physical beauty and cultivated manners. Rice's vampires are sophisticated and sensitive, capable of wit and even gentility. This refinement makes their violence highly stylized and ritualistic. For example, Lestat carefully selects victims based on their beauty or vitality; a young man in the prime of life becomes his triumphant kill, suggesting he approaches feeding like a connoisseur savouring a fine wine (Rice 30). The act of killing is described in lush, sensual prose, aestheticizing the spilling of blood and the sensations of dying:

Killing is no ordinary act,' said the vampire. 'One doesn't simply glut oneself on blood.' He shook his head. 'It is the experience of another's life for certain, and often the experience of the loss of that life through the blood, slowly. It is again and again the experience when I sucked the blood from Lestat's wrist and felt his heart pound with my heart. It is again and again a celebration of that experience; because for vampires that is the ultimate experience (112).

By portraying vampires as cultured and philosophical, Rice amplifies the romantic appeal of their dark deeds. They are not mindless fiends, but tragic antiheroes who can both lament and celebrate life's intensity (Ikawati 155). Rice's innovation lies in allowing the vampire to tell his own story, eliciting the reader's empathy. As David Punter observes, *Interview* brings "decadent materials under a controlling intelligence," subjecting traditional Gothic horrors to a thoughtful, self-examining narrative voice (162). In doing so, Rice humanizes violence without sanitizing it. Through Louis's eyes, we experience the sensual richness of vampiric existence: the taste of blood, heightened sight, and hearing, making the violence feel eerily beautiful while acknowledging its grotesque reality. This delicate balance between horror and beauty is central to the novel's Gothic aesthetic.

Furthermore, Rice's work channels the Gothic preoccupation with the intertwining of pain and pleasure. Writers like the Marquis de Sade famously explored sexualized violence, and later Gothic works often suggested that what terrifies can also tantalize. Rice continues this tradition by depicting vampiric feeding as a near-orgasmic experience, a perverse union of agony and rapture. Such portrayals resonate with theories of the sublime and physical pain. Burke, as noted, saw terror as thrilling when indirectly experienced (24). In contrast, scholar Elaine Scarry argues that intense physical pain destroys language and thought, making it nearly impossible to express (4). By wrapping violent episodes in eloquent, poetic language, Rice imposes narrative order on chaos. This artistic transfiguration of pain may reflect Rice's own trauma, particularly the loss of her young daughter, which informs the novel's grief-laden tone (Holditch, 24:24). By transforming personal pain into art, the novel demonstrates how Gothic writing provides a space to process suffering. As Scarry notes, "physical pain does not simply resist language, it actively destroys it" (4). Yet literature like *Interview* attempts to restore language in the face of pain, making suffering narratable and even beautiful.

Louis's remorseful recollection and Rice's lyrical prose filter the atrocities, allowing readers to confront disturbing events at a safe distance. We are always aware that we are reading a novel, a crafted performance of violence, not actual violence, which paradoxically makes the experience enjoyable. Similarly, Roland Barthes distinguishes between "plaisir," the comfortable enjoyment of a text, and "jouissance," the unsettling, transcendent bliss that challenges the reader's assumptions and induces a "state of loss" (1-14). A Gothic work like *Interview* delivers "jouissance": the reader is at times disoriented by empathizing with killers, simultaneously thrilled and disturbed. This intense response marks a successful romanticization of violence: the audience is seduced, feeling the pull of dark passions while remaining aware of their moral transgression.

Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* reworks and expands upon traditional Gothic tropes, particularly the romanticization of violence, individual desire, and transgression. By blending Gothic themes with a richly aesthetic style, Rice elevates vampire violence to an art form, presenting it as deeply personal and passionate. The novel portrays violence not as random or senseless but as a product of intense emotional and existential turmoil. Through its introspective and lyrical narrative, *Interview* allows readers to empathize with characters who commit violent acts, presenting their actions as both beautiful and grotesque. This balance between horror and beauty evokes both pleasure and discomfort in the reader, capturing the essence of the Gothic tradition that intertwines pain and pleasure. By transforming personal

suffering into art, Rice's work creates a space for processing trauma and exploring the moral complexities of violence, while maintaining the allure of its dark passions.

III. The Romanticization of Violence in *Interview with the Vampire*

1. The Aestheticization of Violence

Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* goes to great lengths to aestheticize violence, transforming scenes of death and predation into theatrical set-pieces and sensual experiences. Throughout these relationships, Rice emphasizes the deep entanglement of love, desire, and violence for her vampires, showing how acts of brutality often occur in moments of intense intimacy. This blending of tenderness and cruelty heightens the novel's exploration of power, control, and eroticism, making violence not just a source of horror but also of dark beauty and emotional complexity. From the opening chapters, where Lestat initiates Louis into vampirism, the language frames violence in terms of intimacy and seduction. When Lestat first bites Louis, Louis experiences terrible pain mingled with perverse ecstasy: "it made me think of a lover," Louis tells the interviewer, as he recounts how their bodies intertwined and their blood was shared (Rice 21). The bite is likened to a kiss, forging a blood bond that is both destructive and erotic. This explicit blending of violence and sensuality is a hallmark of Rice's style. Killing is rarely depicted in clinical terms; it is felt viscerally, conveyed through lush imagery and metaphors of union. For instance, Louis's first kill under Lestat's guidance is described as a mesmerizing, almost erotic experience:

The sucking mesmerized me; the warm struggling of the man was soothing to the tension of my hands; and there came the beating of the drum again, which was the drumbeat of his heart-only this time it beat in perfect rhythm with the drumbeat of my own heart, the two resounding in every fiber of my being, until the beat began to grow slower and slower, so that each was a soft rumble that threatened to go on without end (31).

It reads like a drug high or sexual climax, until Lestat abruptly snaps, "He's dead, you idiot... You don't drink after they're dead!" (31). In that moment, Rice conveys the seductive allure of the kill, as Louis becomes intoxicated by it, while also reasserting its gruesome outcome.

The description of the “drumbeat of his heart” coordinated with Louis’s heartbeat symbolizes a deep, almost spiritual connection between the victim and Louis, enhancing the intensity of the act. The “soft rumble” as the heartbeat fades signifies the victim’s life slipping away, while Louis’s growing intoxication and rapture are highlighted. This suggests that for Louis, the act of killing becomes a transformative and almost euphoric experience. However, Lestat’s cynical interruption jolts both Louis and the reader back into the grim reality of death. By abruptly pointing out the victim’s lifelessness, Lestat reminds us that the moment of pleasure is fleeting and leads to irreversible loss. This oscillation between rapture and horror allows the reader to momentarily experience the kill as ecstatic and transformative for Louis, before pulling back to confront death.

Rice frequently uses Claudia’s appearance to explore the unsettling tension between innocence and monstrosity, framing her as a figure of both angelic beauty and predatory violence. A pivotal moment in the novel occurs when Lestat turns the five-year-old Claudia into a vampire, a profoundly disturbing act that Rice narrates with an eerie beauty. Claudia is described as “mute and beautiful” as she feeds for the first time, her doll-like innocence contrasting sharply with the predatory act (Rice 91). Many of Rice’s descriptions of Claudia frame her as an uncanny mix of angelic appearance and monstrous behaviour. In one scene, Claudia lounges in a lace-trimmed nightgown with stitched pearls, looking “doll-like,” except for the unsettling “sharpness” in her voice and demeanour:

Yet more and more her doll-like face seemed to possess two totally aware adult eyes, and innocence seemed lost somewhere with neglected toys and the loss of a certain patience. There was something dreadfully sensual about her lounging on the settee in a tiny nightgown of lace and stitched pearls; she became an eerie and powerful seductress, her voice as clear and sweet as ever, though it had a resonance which was womanish, a sharpness sometimes that proved shocking (94).

This passage highlights the contradiction between Claudia’s eternally childlike body and her fully mature consciousness. Her physical appearance suggests innocence, but her gaze and behaviour betray the presence of an adult mind. The imagery surrounding childhood, such as abandoned toys, suggests a premature loss of innocence and a stunting of natural development. Claudia’s attire and mannerisms amplify this tension. She is framed as delicate, yet the narrative reveals her as possessing emotional power and adult sensuality. This transformation evokes the uncanny, a fusion of the familiar and the unnatural that provokes

discomfort (Freud 217). Claudia becomes a liminal figure, caught between child and adult, victim and threat, embodying themes of arrested growth and distorted identity. Rice aestheticizes this contradiction through lush, stylized descriptions that render Claudia's violence hauntingly beautiful. Her childlike appearance heightens the disturbing elegance of her actions, as moments of predation are filtered through imagery of lace, pearls, and porcelain beauty. In this way, Rice uses Claudia to merge violence and visual allure, transforming brutality into something theatrically and artistically rendered, and ultimately reinforcing the novel's fascination with the erotic and aesthetic dimensions of death.

Throughout the novel, Rice incorporates allusions to literature and art, placing violent events within a broader aesthetic context. For example, when Claudia urges Louis to kill, he recalls lines reminiscent of Wordsworth, as though attempting to sublimate the act through poetry: "You are in love with your mortal nature! You chase after the phantoms of your former self. [. . .] You do not know your vampire nature. You are like an adult who, looking back on his childhood, realizes that he never appreciated it" (Rice 81-82; Linkin 4). Harriet Linkin suggests that *Interview* partly responds to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", with Louis's compulsion to tell his tale reflecting a vampire aesthetic similar to the Mariner's drive to recount his curse (1-7). Linkin further identifies parallels between Coleridge's language and Rice's descriptions, noting that Claudia's golden hair, red lips, and deathly pallor resemble Coleridge's personification of Life-in-Death (2). Through these literary allusions, Rice elevates the violence to a mythic, poetic level.

Rice's aestheticization of violence serves as a means of processing grief and trauma through beauty. Critics have noted that *Interview with the Vampire* was written after the death of Rice's young daughter. Rice has confirmed that the character of Claudia embodies her own fears and sorrows, the pain of losing a child and the anger at a universe that allowed it (Holditch 24:24). Rather than presenting a straightforward, literal account of her grief, Rice transforms it into a Gothic fantasy, allowing her to explore and process her anguish from a psychologically safe distance; a concept that echoes Edmund Burke's idea of experiencing terror vicariously, where danger is felt intensely but at a remove that ensures safety (Burke 15). Louis's love for Claudia and his devastation at her fate, when she is destroyed by sunlight, could be seen as reflecting Rice's own mourning:

The hand that clutched at the child was whole like a mummy's hand. But the child, the ancient one, my Claudia, was ashes. A cry rose in me, a wild, consuming cry that came from the bowels of my being, rising up like the wind in that narrow place, the wind that swirled the rains teeming on those ashes,

beating at the trace of a tiny hand against the bricks, that golden hair lifting, those loose strands rising, flying upwards. And a blow struck me even as I cried out (Rice 273–274).

The horror here is intimate and sorrowful. By presenting this ultimate act of violence in lyrical prose, Rice demonstrates the cathartic purpose of aestheticizing violence. It allows both the author and reader to confront unbearable pain within the confines of art. Romanticized violence thus has a therapeutic aspect. As William Veeder suggests, “a gothic text positions its reader in a potential space where the psyche’s repressed desires and foreclosed issues can be engaged and thus where healing can occur” (Benefiel 270). *Interview with the Vampire* creates such a space by engaging with taboo desires and horrific events in a controlled, imaginative way, allowing the writer and reader to process dark emotions (Benefiel 270). The beauty overlaying the violence does not negate its atrocity but instead invites readers to reflect on it rather than recoil. In this prolonged contemplation, there is potential for understanding or catharsis.

The central relationship between Lestat and Louis is defined by an imbalance of power, which Rice uses to aestheticize violence by portraying domination and submission as complex, often seductive dynamics rather than straightforward acts of cruelty. As Louis’s maker, Lestat immediately asserts control by taking over Louis’s plantation, choosing their victims, and withholding knowledge about their vampiric nature to maintain Louis’s dependence (Rice 30–40). Lestat’s control is coercive. When Louis refuses to kill out of guilt, Lestat mocks his weakness and forces him to kill: “Vampires are killers [...] they’ll see your flaw [...] and seek to kill you” (78). Their relationship shows traits of an abusive dynamic. Lestat moves between charm and cruelty, keeping Louis emotionally unstable. Lestat’s jealousy and possessiveness, especially at the thought of Louis leaving, reveal a twisted affection. While Lestat cares for Louis in his own way, that care is tied to his need for dominance (Ikawati 151–152). Louis remains with Lestat due to fear, dependency, and attachment (Ikawati 151). This toxic co-dependency, where Louis both hates and depends on Lestat’s control, turns violence into a complicated and intense relationship that Rice portrays as both cruel and compelling.

The introduction of Claudia complicates the power dynamic between Louis and Lestat, turning their duo into a family. Desperate to keep Louis with him and alleviate his melancholy, Lestat turns a five-year-old orphan into a vampire, presenting Claudia as a twisted act of love. This violence creates the child and cements their family: two vampire parents and their eternal child, a family that is far from traditional. Lestat occasionally refers

to himself as Claudia's mother, while Claudia begins to see Louis as her romantic partner, not her father (Benefiel 263). This merging of parental love, romantic affection, and ownership is transgressive, with Louis describing their relationship as "Father and Daughter. Lover and Lover" (Rice 94). This blurring of familial and erotic love challenges conventional family roles, a key feature of Gothic literature (Diplacidi 213).

As Claudia's mind matures in her childlike body, she resents her fathers for creating her. Her need for independence leads to patricide when she poisons and kills Lestat, hoping to free herself and Louis (Rice 203). Murder becomes the only way Claudia can assert autonomy against her maker. Louis, out of love for Claudia, colludes in her rebellion, choosing his pseudo-daughter over his maker (203-210). The family ultimately implodes, as Louis and Claudia flee to Europe, leaving Lestat for (un)dead. Rice aestheticizes this violent rupture as both a destructive and liberating moment, showing that when normal family evolution is impossibly arrested, only intense, often brutal breakups can restore a sense of movement and agency within the narrative.

When Louis and Claudia encounter Armand in Paris, the theme of power-through-violence takes on a more insidious form. Armand, an ancient vampire who seems gentle and wise, attracts Louis with his promise of understanding. However, Claudia senses that Armand wants Louis for himself and views her as an obstacle (Rice 226). Unable to harm Claudia directly, Armand allows the Parisian vampire coven to punish her for her mere existence. The coven abducts Claudia and her new guardian, Madeline, and executes them by exposing them to sunlight (265-275). By not intervening, Armand effectively orchestrates Claudia's death while keeping his hands clean. This betrayal, violence through inaction, destroys Louis's beloved child and leaves him emotionally shattered (276-277). Armand then rescues Louis and offers guidance, binding him to himself. Here, violence is used as a tool to remove Louis's attachment, Claudia, in order to possess Louis. Louis later takes revenge by burning the Théâtre des Vampires and annihilating the coven. However, the damage is done. Claudia is gone, and Louis is left spiritually empty, clinging to Armand in despair (279-280).

Throughout these relationships, Rice emphasizes the deep entanglement of love, desire, and violence for her vampires. Acts of brutality often occur in moments of intimacy. Sharing blood serves both as sustenance and a substitute for sexual intercourse in Rice's mythology: vampires experience lust through feeding, not sex (31). As will be discussed further below, who bites whom, and who gives or receives blood, becomes an analogue to sexual dominance or submission. For example, Lestat turning Louis is a deeply erotic, quasi-parental act that establishes Lestat's dominance. Later, when Louis gives blood to create a new vampire, Madeleine, at Claudia's urging, he symbolically takes on Lestat's role for the

first time, an empowering yet troubling experience for him (246-247). In Rice's world, violence is the medium of passion: every bite is an intimate act, and every power struggle carries a charge of desire. This dynamic is why the novel's homoerotic subtext is so prominent (Haggerty 11). Rice queers the vampire family by presenting two fathers and their unnatural child, infusing the Louis-Lestat bond with potent erotic tension. Nina Auerbach has observed that Gothic fiction often encodes queer desire through monster narratives (Latham 785). *Interview* asks readers to sympathize with a non-traditional family and a love between two men. Because eroticism is channelled through violence, the novel could explore these themes in 1976, when explicit same-sex romance in mainstream fiction was still taboo (Haggerty 11). The result is a story where the lines between love and cruelty, nurturing and destroying, are constantly blurred. Louis and Lestat's relationship can be read as both a tragic romance and a tale of domination: they cannot live with or without each other. Even after betrayal and violence, Louis retains a lingering love for Lestat, as seen in their brief reunion decades later, and Lestat never stops yearning for Louis's companionship. Their immortality binds them in an eternal cycle of attraction and repulsion.

2. Staging Violence and Poaching Meaning

In *Interview with the Vampire*, the Théâtre des Vampires plays a crucial role in exploring violence as art. In this sequence, a group of vampires led by Armand stages a horrific play for a human audience, where a real woman is graphically murdered onstage (Rice 195-205). The audience mistakes the brutal act for a carefully staged illusion and responds with applause, unaware of the truth (205). This scene blends beauty and brutality, turning violence into an aesthetic performance. Rice uses this blend to draw attention to the seductive nature of violence when it is framed as art, forcing both the characters and the reader to engage with the ethical dilemma of consuming such violence. It implicates the vampires, the audience, and Louis, who is both a participant in and a narrator of the events. Through this, Rice also implicates the reader, making the consumption of violent spectacle a central theme in the novel.

The Théâtre des Vampires scene is designed to provoke intense emotional responses from both the characters and the reader. As Ames notes, the audience in the theatre "witnesses" the crime in vivid detail, sharing Louis's shock and horror as passive spectators of the murder (217). Rice's use of descriptive language creates an emotional rupture, shattering the distance between beauty and horror. This aligns with spectatorship theory, which examines how audiences engage with subjects in media, such as violence (Pribram

146-147). The spectators in the Théâtre des Vampires, like the reader, mistake real murder for a performance, revealing how an audience can become desensitized to violence when framed as entertainment (Pribram 149). Rice critiques this dynamic by drawing the reader into the spectacle, forcing them to confront their role in romanticizing violence. The interviewer's simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from the scene reflects the tension at the heart of horror, where the aestheticization of violence pulls viewers in, even as it challenges their ethical stance.

Ames's essay in *Dracula Studies* offers a clear reading of how violence, sexuality, and voyeurism come together in *Interview with the Vampire*. She points out that the novel shows sex and violence as public events. These acts are performed, watched, and consumed by audiences inside and outside the story. Ames draws a connection between the voyeurism of the audience and the reader's engagement, noting that Louis's earlier feeding of Armand is watched as an erotic performance by a "voyeuristic audience" (8). This idea is even stronger in the Théâtre des Vampires scene. Here, the human audience expects to see a gothic play. Instead, they watch a violent and sexual attack on a woman by vampires. Ames describes this scene as similar to gang rape (8-9). The audience watches real violence but thinks it is a performance. This shows how the novel makes violence into a show that is both shocking and sexualized. By showing these acts as performances for watching, Rice explores power, desire, and control. The vampires make their violence both frightening and tempting, and both the audience inside the story and the readers become part of this. They watch and take pleasure in the violent acts. Ames shows that *Interview with the Vampire* asks readers to think about their own watching of violence (9). It highlights how culture is fascinated by violence that is both scary and attractive.

Rice's vampires embody Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, which is marked by excess, deformity, and constant transformation. Bakhtin describes the grotesque as a celebration of the body's openness and ability to grow through consumption and degradation (319-322). Bakhtin highlights that the grotesque body is defined by its orifices and convexities such as the mouth, bowels, and phallus, which blur the boundaries between the self and the world through acts of eating, drinking, copulation, and other bodily exchanges (319-322). In the Théâtre des Vampires scene, the human victim's body becomes a site of grotesque violation and transgression where the boundaries of bodily integrity and social norms are violently pushed. Yet it is the vampires themselves who most fully embody the grotesque, enacting a double body that is open, excessive, and cosmically entwined, celebrating life through the grotesque fusion of bodily degradation and regeneration. Further, Rice's vampires embody Bakhtin's grotesque in the act of perpetual becoming, never finished

and continually transforming through consumption and bodily excess. The crowd's fascination with the spectacle at the Théâtre des Vampires reflects the complex nature of the grotesque, which both attracts and repels. The vampires exemplify this logic through their feeding rituals and shape-shifting, which both consume and transform, symbolizing an ongoing cycle of death and rebirth. Rice's detailed description of the victim's blood pooling on ornate fabrics and the frenzy of the vampires highlights this inversion of life and death (Rice 200-210). The beauty of the vampire world is overshadowed by the horror that it conceals, critiquing how violence is packaged and consumed as art. The grotesque display in the Théâtre des Vampires underscores how violent spectacle merges beauty and destruction, revealing that the aesthetic allure of the scene is inseparable from its acts of suffering and violation.

The role of the boy interviewer in the novel is key to reflecting the reader's engagement with the text. Michel de Certeau's concept of textual "poaching" helps explain how the interviewer, like the reader, appropriates meaning from Louis's narrative (174). De Certeau argues that readers poach elements of a text based on their desires, often disregarding the original meaning (168-174). The interviewer poaches a narrative of empowerment and immortality from Louis's story of suffering and guilt. Louis's narrative, which should be understood as a tragic confession, is consumed by the interviewer as a gothic romance, focused on the allure of vampirism. Louis tries to correct the interviewer's misinterpretations, such as when he explains that Lestat, not himself, disturbed the theatre performance (Rice 226). This misreading mirrors the way readers often romanticize violence, appropriating what they desire from the text while overlooking its ethical complexity. The boy romanticizes Louis's story, turning a narrative of moral struggle into one of empowerment and spectacle (174).

The Théâtre des Vampires scene illustrates how violence can be transformed into an art form, blending brutality with beauty to create a seductive and morally complex scene. This scene forces both the characters and the reader to grapple with the ethical implications of consuming such violence. The interviewer's misinterpretation of Louis's story highlights the reader's tendency to appropriate violence for personal gratification, overlooking the moral consequences.

IV. BDSM Erotica and the Cultural Literary Impact of *Interview with the Vampire*

Interview with the Vampire stands as a cornerstone of modern vampire fiction, not merely for its innovative portrayal of sympathetic vampires but for its deliberate integration of erotic power dynamics rooted in Rice's earlier BDSM-themed fiction. Rice's personal experiences also played a role in shaping these themes. Raised in a devout Catholic family, Rice was deeply affected by the doctrines of original sin, guilt, and penance (Riley 147). Though she would later distance herself from organized religion, these theological structures permeate her literary imagination (Salai). In interviews, Rice frequently acknowledged how her religious upbringing instilled in her a lifelong fascination with questions of salvation and damnation (Salai).

In *Interview with the Vampire*, the relationship between Lestat and Louis exemplifies BDSM dynamics. Lestat's act of turning Louis into a vampire without consent mirrors non-consensual initiation scenes in BDSM contexts, where power dynamics are central. Lestat's actions are not just cruel but seductive and transformative, intertwining pain and pleasure. Waxman notes that Rice's characters experience pain and pleasure as a continuum of intense sensation, rather than opposites (92). Louis's transformation is both horrifying and beautiful, reflecting the emotional complexity of submission, where pain leads to personal revelation. This mirrors BDSM narratives, where the submissive often finds empowerment and self-discovery through surrender.

The theme of submission is central to Louis's character arc. Like the submissives in Rice's erotica, Louis endures because of his loyalty to the figure who dominates him. He repeatedly rejects Lestat but returns, emotionally dependent on the very relationship that causes him suffering. As Lash argues, Rice's erotic characters find identity through submission, and Louis follows this pattern (71). Louis's identity as a vampire, a killer, and a companion is tied to Lestat's dominance.

Rice's exploration of BDSM, masochistic fantasies, and sexual autonomy in *Interview with the Vampire* and her other works is closely tied to her feminist beliefs and views on sexual freedom (*Playboy*). In a *Playboy* interview, she argues that fantasies, including sadomasochistic and rape fantasies, are a natural part of the human psyche and transcend gender (*Playboy*). This perspective is evident in *Interview with the Vampire*, where violence and sexuality are intertwined not gratuitously but as means to explore deeper themes of power, control, and identity. The vampire's predatory nature is often sexualized, with violent acts described in terms of intimacy and sensuality. Rice's personal views on BDSM further illuminate these themes: she defends women's right to explore masochistic fantasies without shame, emphasizing that such fantasies are not inherently dangerous or politically incorrect (*Playboy*). She notes that both men and women share these fantasies and that

denying them equates to repressing a part of human nature (*Playboy*). Likewise, the violence in *Interview with the Vampire* is never senseless but ritualized and emotionally charged, mirroring the intensity Rice associates with BDSM practices.

This conception of suffering as spiritually transformative aligns closely with her fictional portrayal of pain as a conduit to emotional or moral revelation, particularly in both her erotica and vampire fiction. In *Interview with the Vampire*, Rice channels these religious motifs through her aestheticization of violence and her depiction of guilt-ridden characters such as Louis, whose despair mirrors a kind of spiritual crisis. The longing for redemption amid a life of sin becomes a secular analogue to religious confession, with the vampire's tale taking on the tone of a penitential monologue (Waxman 80-85). Rice's narrative could be structured around Catholic tropes of guilt and grace, as her characters often seek transcendence through suffering. Raised in a Catholic household, Rice developed a fascination with sin, guilt, and redemption, psychological undercurrents that permeate both her erotica and her vampire narratives (Salai).

Her turn to erotica in the early 1980s can be seen as a radical response to the cultural climate of sexual repression and feminist debates over sexual agency. Rice both embraced and distanced herself from the stigmas surrounding sexual subversion, crafting narratives that allowed for emotional and philosophical inquiry into domination, submission, and identity (*Playboy*). After *Interview*, Rice published explicit erotica under the pseudonyms A.N. Roquelaure and Anne Rampling, most notably *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet* and *Exit to Eden*. These texts openly explore fantasies of dominance, submission, and ritualized sexuality, which Rice later adapted, more obliquely but no less powerfully, into her vampire saga.

In *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*, Rice literalizes traditional fairy-tale tropes by transforming Beauty into a submissive, enslaved figure who undergoes corporal punishment and ritual obedience as forms of erotic initiation (Roquelaure). Critics such as Sarah Lash argue that Rice "uses the Beauty myth to make the power play explicit," shifting the narrative from a passive female awakening to a scenario of voluntary submission and sexual training (145). The trilogy presents a courtly realm where submission is a ritualized honor, reinforcing a structure where intimacy is defined by hierarchical roles (146).

In *Exit to Eden*, Rice, writing under the pseudonym Anne Rampling, explores a consensual BDSM resort where the slave/master dynamic is performed with both intensity and affection. Barbara Frey Waxman emphasizes that Rice's erotica portrays sexual fulfillment "through pain and pleasure" and captures the emotional resonance of moments when participants feel each other's beating heart during submission and intimacy (95-96). This connection between pain, pleasure, and intimacy mirrors the bond that Rice ascribes to

vampiric feeding. In both her erotica and her vampire fiction, surrendering one's body or blood becomes a metaphor for surrendering the self.

Rice's characters in her erotic fiction are not mere caricatures but complex individuals who negotiate desire, shame, devotion, and power. As Lash notes, these relationships go beyond dramatizing punishment or reward; they delve into identity, often revealing that submission is a means of self-discovery (148). In Rice's works, the submissive character embraces pain as a transformative experience, using ritualized surrender to forge a new sense of self. These later texts echo Rice's vampire novels, where the emotional dynamics of dominance and submission play a significant role.

In *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), Rice explores the emotional complexity of dominance and submission, where a submissive finds beauty in surrender and a dominant figure exercises control with both cruelty and care. These themes are later carried over into her erotic fiction, which develops them within a more explicit and focused framework. Louis, the tortured protagonist of *Interview*, serves as an analogue to the submissive character in BDSM relationships: emotionally dependent and sustained by the very relationship that causes him pain. In both her erotica and vampire fiction, Rice explores how power dynamics shape emotional and psychological growth, often blurring the line between suffering and transcendence.

Rice frames vampiric violence within the aesthetics of BDSM. Lestat, the vampire who creates Louis, does so with complete disregard for Louis's consent, mirroring the non-consensual initiation scenes in *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet* (Roquelaure). However, Lestat's actions are not presented as mere cruelty; they are seductive, alluring, and transformative. Waxman observes that Rice's characters often experience pain and pleasure as intertwined, describing them as a continuum of intense sensation rather than opposites (95). Louis's transformation is both horrifying and beautiful, reflecting the dynamics of BDSM narratives where submission leads to personal revelation.

The emotional violence Lestat inflicts on Louis is equally intense. He isolates Louis, mocks his reluctance to kill, and emotionally binds him through the creation of Claudia. This manipulation mirrors the psychological control exerted by dominants in Rice's erotica. In *Exit to Eden*, dominants structure the submissive's life, dictating their behaviour, dress, and speech (Rampling). Similarly, in *Interview*, Lestat exercises control over Louis's moral universe, challenging his notions of right and wrong. Rice uses blood-sharing in *Interview* as a metaphor for erotic exchange. Feeding is described in intimate, sensual terms, akin to scenes of physical bondage and corporal punishment in her erotica. Lestat's creation of Louis

is framed as a slow, ritualized act of biting and sharing blood, a liturgical ritual, spanning across several pages:

Be still. I am going to drain you now to the very threshold of death, and I want you to be quiet, so quiet that you can almost hear the flow of blood through your veins, so quiet that you can hear the flow of that same blood through mine. It is your consciousness, your will, which must keep you alive.' [...] "Candles burned in the upstairs parlor, where we had planned the death of the overseer. [...] as though a golden presence hovered above me, suspended in the stairwell, softly entangled with the railings, curling and contracting like smoke. Listen, keep your eyes wide,' Lestat whispered to me, his lips moving against my neck. I remember that the movement of his lips raised the hair all over my body, sent a shock of sensation through my body that was not unlike the pleasure of passion...(Rice 35-38)

Rice's BDSM erotica and her vampire fiction both rely on ritual and pageantry. In *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*, rituals of discipline, public exhibition, and ceremonial servitude shape the submissive's identity (Roquelaure).

Like the submissives in *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet* or *Exit to Eden*, Louis endures because of his paradoxical loyalty to the figure who dominates him. He repeatedly rejects and returns to Lestat, emotionally dependent on the relationship that causes him pain. Lash writes that Rice's erotic characters "find identity through submission," and Louis follows this pattern exactly (148). His identity as a vampire, a killer, and a companion is tied to Lestat's influence. Claudia's role in *Interview with the Vampire* also anticipates themes of possession and infantilization that Rice later explores more explicitly in her erotic fiction. In *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*, adult characters are often made powerless or childlike through submission (Roquelaure). Claudia, though intellectually mature, remains physically a child, embodying a forced submission she cannot escape. Her inability to grow represents forced submission and becomes a metaphor for imposed powerlessness. She attempts to rebel by trying to destroy Lestat, but her rebellion fails. Claudia's struggle with her stunted development highlights the psychological complexities of relationships defined by domination and submission (195). Her failed rebellion underscores the emotional weight carried by those trapped in power structures they did not choose (Waxman 95).

Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* redefined the vampire genre by integrating BDSM aesthetics into mainstream literature. Prior to Rice, vampire fiction often emphasized

horror, monstrosity, and the “otherness” of vampires, portraying them as figures defined by fear and alienation, or as vehicles “for philosophic speculation” (Waxman 85, 82). Rice transforms the vampire into a figure of beauty, pain, and erotic longing, allowing the genre to explore emotional and sexual complexity alongside traditional themes of fear (85). Rice herself acknowledged her love for violence, stating, “I do love violence. I absolutely love it” (*Playboy*). This embrace of violence shapes her portrayal of vampire violence as a complex, erotic act, not merely cruelty.

The mainstreaming of BDSM themes in fantasy fiction can be attributed to Rice’s influence. While her erotica was often controversial and critically marginalized, her literary success with *Interview with the Vampire* bridged the gap between niche sexual fantasy and mainstream storytelling (Diaz). Her ability to craft narratives that integrate sensual domination and aestheticized pain opened space for similar themes to be explored more openly in fiction. Authors like Laurell K. Hamilton and Jeaniene Frost have continued Rice’s legacy, embedding BDSM and power dynamics into popular urban fantasy and paranormal romance. Rice thus served as a literary forerunner, legitimizing erotic tropes and embedding them within Gothic and romantic traditions.

Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* also significantly influenced contemporary romance literature by shaping portrayals of complex and morally ambiguous relationships beyond the Gothic genre, notably in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (Franiuk and Scherr 16). Although firmly rooted in Gothic tradition, Rice’s novel blends themes of power, desire, and violence within romantic relationships, laying the groundwork for modern paranormal and supernatural romance. Her depiction of eroticized violence introduced the idea of romanticized violence, where love and pain coexist, an enduring theme that resonates strongly in *Twilight* and similar works.

In *Interview with the Vampire*, violence is not merely predation; it is often framed as an expression of love, desire, and control. Lestat’s actions toward Louis and Claudia, while violent, are depicted as deeply emotional and, at times, tender. This portrayal laid the groundwork for works like *Twilight*, where Edward Cullen’s controlling behaviour toward Bella is framed as protective and romantic, despite being manipulative (Meyer). Renae Franiuk and Samantha Scherr argue that *Twilight* romanticizes Edward’s possessiveness, presenting it as love rather than recognizing it as abusive (14). This dynamic mirrors the relationship between Lestat and Louis in *Interview with the Vampire*, where Lestat’s love is often intertwined with domination and violence. In both works, abusive control is romanticized, making it difficult for readers to distinguish between love and manipulation. However, Rice’s Catholic background brings a different emotional and moral depth to her

story. Themes of guilt, grace, and the longing for redemption shape Louis's inner conflict, making his struggle a spiritual one. Unlike *Twilight*, which reflects a more idealized and often clear view of eternal love rooted in a Mormon worldview, *Interview with the Vampire* portrays love and violence as morally entangled and unresolved. Franiuk and Scherr argue that romanticizing controlling behavior can normalize unhealthy relationships, especially for younger readers (14–20). The idea that love involves control and even violence appears in *Twilight*, where Edward often controls Bella's choices, which the story presents as loving and protective (Meyer). In both *Twilight* and *Interview*, love is linked to violence and possession. Franiuk and Scherr warn that this connection can give readers the wrong idea about what a healthy relationship looks like (14).

In contemporary paranormal romance, the impact of *Interview with the Vampire* is clear. The influence of Rice's portrayal of violence as part of intimate relationships has carried over into works like *Twilight*, as well as into fan fiction communities, where love is often depicted as involving power struggles and emotional control (Broderick). This romanticization of controlling relationships is evident not only in the supernatural genre but also in broader romance fiction, where violence and abuse are sometimes presented as expressions of love and devotion, rather than harmful behaviour.

V. Conclusion

Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* is as much about beauty and love as it is about horror and death. By romanticizing violence, making it poetic, intimate, and philosophically provocative, Rice compels readers to grapple with why darkness can be so enthralling. The novel's aesthetic treatment of violence, its seduction of suffering, does not simply glorify evil; rather, it illuminates pain and passion in a new way. Rice shows us the sublime side of the horrific: how a moonlit murder can become a tableau, or how the intimacy of a bite can mimic the ecstasy of a lover's embrace. In doing so, she carries forward the Gothic project of finding fierce beauty in the macabre. At the same time, Rice does not let us, or her characters, escape the moral weight of what transpires. The vampires face devastating consequences, loss of loved ones, existential despair, spiritual damnation. The novel thus contains a built-in critique of its own romanticization: yes, the violence is mesmerizing, but it is also terrible. This duality is why the story stays with us so powerfully. As readers, we are drawn to the romance, the idea of eternal youth and love, the freedom of defying human laws, but we are confronted with the price: eternal anguish, the perversion of love, the loss of one's soul.

Emotionally, *Interview* resonates because it magnifies fundamental human dilemmas through a fantastical lens. It exaggerates the pangs of parenthood: what if your child could never grow up or leave you? The torment of toxic love: what if you were bound forever to someone who harms you? And the grief of immortality: what if you outlived everyone you ever cared for? By transposing these into the realm of vampires, Rice makes the familiar unfamiliar, inviting us to reflect anew on power and morality in relationships. The abusive dynamics between Lestat and Louis echo real-life abusive relationships, just as Claudia's predicament echoes any child's frustration at being controlled. The difference is that in the vampire world, these conflicts are heightened to life-and-death intensity. Readers find themselves sympathizing with situations they would never encounter.

Culturally, the novel helped ignite a modern fascination with the sympathetic vampire that endures to this day, seen in works from *The Vampire Diaries* to *Twilight*. Rice opened the door for vampires to be not just villains or mysterious figures, but protagonists with whom audiences deeply identify. In doing so, she also brought discussions of queer love, albeit in coded form, and non-traditional family structures into mainstream genre fiction. The cultural fascination with her vampires often centers on their seductive qualities, their androgynous beauty, their tragic glamour, their defiance of norms. Rice's work also invites critique of that indulgence, as we have seen. The conversation her novel began, about audience complicity and ethical storytelling, continues in academic and fan circles. One can read *Interview* as a straightforward romantic horror or as a metafictional critique of romanticizing horror; its richness supports multiple interpretations. This complexity is likely why it can be considered a classic of modern Gothic literature.

In conclusion, *Interview with the Vampire* achieves a delicate and powerful effect: it romanticizes violence to probe violence's emotional and moral dimensions more deeply. The novel seduces us with beautiful monsters and then makes us ask why we are so seduced. It presents cruelty together with love, suggesting that the line between the two is thinner than we would like to admit, kept in check only by the grace of mortality and conscience. Rice affirms that art can take even the darkest subject matter and render it compelling and relatable. We cry for a child vampire who kills; we feel empathy for a murderer who hates what he does; and we even yearn, like the interviewer, for a taste of their nocturnal world. Such is the enduring magic and dilemma of *Interview with the Vampire*. It remains a work that haunts and fascinates, much like its undead protagonists, leaving us to ponder the nature of our own desires and the eternal human attraction to stories where beauty and terror entwine.

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