

# Predator and Prey

The Vampire Child in Novels by S. P. Somtow and John Ajvide Lindqvist

## Rovdjur och byte. Vampyrbarnet i S. P. Somtows och John Ajvide Lindqvists romaner

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### ABSTRACT

The temporal convergence between the social and cultural preoccupation with child sexual abuse, with the pedophile as the ultimate predator, and the appearance of the child vampire as a central character in vampire fiction in the late twentieth century can be traced to genre conventions and to representations of the vampire and of the child. This article examines vampire children and child sexual abuse in three novels: S. P. Somtow's *Vampire Junction* (1984) and *Valentine* (1992), and John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In* (2004), and shows how they tap into contemporary sexual taboos and fears for children in order to create uncanny and Gothic effects. Highlighting that the representations of the vampire child contain a number of dichotomies, the article also relates all three novels to splatterpunk, and outlines a different trajectory for the sympathetic vampire that led to Lindqvist's novel, which triggered the Swedish Gothic boom in the twenty-first century.

### SAMMANFATTNING

Det tidsmässiga sammanträffandet mellan att sexuella övergrepp mot barn blev en stor samhälls- och kulturfråga med pedofilen som den ultimata förbrytaren och att vampyrbarnet blev en central figur i vampyrberättelser i slutet på 1900-talet kan härledas till genrekonventioner och framställningar av vampyren och barnet. Den här artikeln undersöker vampyrbarn och sexuella övergrepp mot barn i tre romaner: S. P. Somtows *Vampire Junction*

tion (1984) och *Valentine* (1992) samt John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Låt den rätte komma in* (2004), och visar på hur de använder samtida sexuella tabun och rädsla för barns utsatthet för att skapa kusliga och gotiska effekter. Artikeln belyser att framställningen av vampyrbarnet förenar ett antal dikotomier i en figur och relaterar dessutom alla tre romanerna till splatterpunk. Den spårar ett utvecklingsspår för den sympatiska vampyren som leder fram till Lindqvists roman, som utlöser den svenska gotiska boomen på 2000-talet.

#### Keywords

Vampire Child, The Gothic, Pedophilia, Child Sexual Abuse, S. P. Somtow, John Ajvide Lindqvist

#### Nyckelord

vampyrbarn, det gotiska, pedofili, sexuella övergrepp mot barn, S. P. Somtow, John Ajvide Lindqvist

“when I lost my innocence I also lost my capacity for evil.”

S. P. Somtow, *Valentine*

The vampire first appeared in Gothic fiction towards the end of what has traditionally been considered the most important period of Gothic literature (1764–1820) in John Polidori's “The Vampyre” (1819). Later well-known vampire stories published in the nineteenth century include Joseph Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla* (1871–72) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The first Swedish vampire novel was published in 1848 by Viktor Rydberg, and its title alludes to that of Polidori's short story: *Wampyren*. An undead, blood-sucking, lethal creature of the night that may be, and often is, mistaken for a mortal human being, the vampire represented a deeply disturbing and invasive Other. As Fred Botting and Dale Townshend point out in the introduction to their edited volume on nineteenth-century Gothic, aptly subtitled *At Home with the Vampire*, “[s]exuality, the psyche and the home provide the main focus for Gothic writing” in that century, with “the vampire both their fictional and literary-critical avatar” (Botting and Townshend 2004, 1). In this context, Botting and Townshend also highlight the centrality of the uncanny to discussions of the Gothic, including “phenomena that double, repeat, return and reverse normal judgments” and the crossings of all sorts of boundaries: “The reversibility of the uncanny, its traversal of boundaries and movement from one meaning to its opposite, is traced by Freud at the beginning of his essay [“The Uncanny” (1919)]” (Botting and Townshend 2004, 1). From the nineteenth century onwards, the figure of the vampire has come to stand for some of the most uncanny aspects of Gothic fiction, reflecting and feeding on fears related to sex, self, and home in the contemporary society of the fiction's origin.

In the mid-1970s, the development of the vampire story took a new turn; in Fredrick Thomas Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tapes* (1975) and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), the vampire narrates his story from his own point of view and becomes the protagonist of the tale rather than its monstrous villain. These novels mark the beginning of the era of the sympathetic vampire, which has lasted into the twenty-first century as evi-

dent by, for instance, the *Twilight* phenomenon – Stephanie Meyer’s four novels (2005–2008) and the five films based on those novels (2008–2012) – and Charlaine Harris’s fourteen novels in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series (2001–2013), which spawned the TV series *True Blood* (2008–2014).<sup>1</sup> Despite this shift in perspective and emotional investment, the vampire is nevertheless a heavily sexualized figure, as it has been from its first appearance in English fiction in Polidori’s “The Vampyre.” Indeed, the vampire of the last few decades is a transgressive, conflicted, or ambiguous character that represents fear and desire, violence and sexuality, death and immortality – a character with many decades or even centuries of experience, and a never-aging perfect body.

This complexity is further compounded in the figure of the vampire child, which subverts typical representations of both vampire and child. It was in the mid-1970s, too, that this figure entered the stage of fiction: there are vampire children both in Stephen King’s more traditional vampire novel *Salem’s Lot* (1975) – which has a narrative focus on the vampires’ victims and potential vampire slayers reminiscent of Stoker’s *Dracula* – and Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*. In Rice’s novel, Claudia is five years old when she becomes a vampire, and her relationship to her queer, male “vampire parents” Louis and Lestat has incestuous overtones. Indeed, the vampire child actualizes and uncannily unsettles a host of dichotomies that pertain, in one way or another, to representations of children: good-evil, angel-demon, agency-passivity, innocence-experience, naïve-knowing, innocence-guilt, purity-corruption, attraction-repulsion. In what follows I will examine representations of vampire children and child sexual abuse in three novels in which the vampire child is a central figure: S. P. Somtow’s *Vampire Junction* (1984) and *Valentine* (1992), and John Ajvide Lindqvist’s *Let the Right One In* (*Låt den rätte komma in*, 2004).<sup>2</sup> I will show how the depictions of the vampire child in these novels tap into contemporary sexual taboos and fears for children in order to create uncanny and Gothic effects. I will also suggest that, in the most graphic Gothic horror scenes in *Let the Right One In*, Lindqvist, like Somtow in his vampire novels, employs what can be described as splatterpunk strategies.

The emergence of the vampire child in fiction in the three decades between 1975 and 2005 coincided with, and was intimately related to, contemporary social and cultural discourses on child sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> In *Salem’s Lot*, when the two Glick boys – the first to fall

1. On the sympathetic vampire, see Joan Gordon’s “Rehabilitating Revenants, or Sympathetic Vampires in Recent Fiction” (1988).

2. Thai-American S. P. Somtow (Somtow Sucharitkul), who grew up in Europe and now has moved back to Thailand, is “best known as an award-winning novelist and a composer of operas.” As a novelist, he began as a science-fiction writer and then tried his hand at horror fiction. “*Vampire Junction* was voted one of the forty all-time greatest horror books by the Horror Writers’ Association, joining established classics like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*” (Somtow’s *World* 2016). Award-winning John Ajvide Lindqvist, who is currently Sweden’s most well-known and celebrated Gothic writer, worked as a magician and stand-up comedian before publishing his first novel, *Låt den rätte komma in* in 2004. For more information see John Ajvide Lindqvist <http://johnajvide.com/hem/>.

3. See George Rousseau’s introduction to *Children and Sexuality* (2012, 4–9) for an enlightening discussion of Graham Ovenden and Robert Melville’s *Victorian Children* (1972), which includes 149 images of little girls, many nude and assuming daring postures. The content of this book, Rousseau explains, was not regarded as improper then, but it would be unthinkable to publish these images today. Rousseau traces these shifts in attitude and in social and cultural discourses to what he calls the “new Puritanism” that has taken hold of the Anglo-Saxon world since the 1980s (2012, 24). See also Ian Hacking on “The Making and Molding of Child Abuse.” He traces the concept of child abuse in the US from the 1960s through the 1980s and points out that “no one had any glimmering, in 1960, of what was going to count as child abuse in 1990” (Hacking 1991, 257).

victim to vampires in the small town – disappear, there is initially some speculation about pedophiles, who have become contemporary culture's most feared sexual predators.<sup>4</sup> As James Kincaid observes in *Erotic Innocence*, although considered horrifying, stories of child molesting are amongst Western culture's most popular in their virus-like proliferation. Children are increasingly sexualized or eroticized at the same time as adults' erotic responses to children are not only seen as criminal, but incomprehensible (Kincaid 1998, 3, 21).<sup>5</sup> In Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In*, a pedophile, Håkan Bengtsson, is an important character, and the reader actually has access to his perspective: his reasoning, motivations, aesthetic sensibilities, and sexual desires. He lives with the twelve-year-old vampire child Eli, whom Håkan considers to be his "beloved." So, if historically the vampire has unambiguously been cast as the predator and the human being as the prey, the situation is different in more recent novels featuring preteen or early-teen vampire children who are eroticized by vampire or human adults.

The temporal convergence between the social and cultural preoccupation with child sexual abuse and the appearance of the child vampire as a central character in vampire fiction, I argue, can be traced to genre conventions and to representations of the vampire and of the child. Kincaid points out that "[o]ur story of child molesting is a story of nightmare, the literary territory of the Gothic" (1998, 10), a realm the vampire most often belongs to. Vampire fiction also has a tradition of dealing with sexual transgressions and breaking taboos, and, as anthropologist Heather Montgomery observes in *Children and Sexuality*, "Child sex has become, for the vast majority of westerners, the final taboo" (2012, 327). The vampire has been a sexualized – though not always attractive – figure from Polidori's Lord Ruthven onwards: the vampire's bite or "kiss" is frequently regarded as a both literal and metaphorical sexual penetration, and it is often represented as having an orgasmic, if sometimes lethal, effect on the victim.<sup>6</sup> The vampire child is no different from the adult vampire in this respect; it, too, has fangs that penetrate, and it is thus, as a vampire, an already sexualized character.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the vampire child can be seen as a permutation of the Gothic child whose origin has been traced to certain readings of Henry James's Miles and Flora in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and to Freud's theories of infantile sexuality.<sup>8</sup> As Ellis Hanson puts it, Freud's "inherently polymorphously perverse child upstaged the corrupted adult as the uncanny progenitor of trauma, horror, pathology, and sexual secrets,

4. In "Breaking the Taboo of Sex and Adolescence. Children, Sex and the Media," David Sonenschein observes that "from about 1975 into the present [early 1980s], journalists and professionals portray the subject of sex and children in near-apocalyptic terms as something very new and suddenly emerging, as having already spread throughout the culture (thanks to the mass media) and signaling the end of civilization" (1984, 111). Sonenschein concludes that "the reaction against [the] 'Lolitaism' of the late 1970s has turned in the early 1980s to an increasing prosecution of pedophilia, defined only as sexual abuse. Pedophiles (and pedophiles-as-pornographers) have replaced the homosexual as the culture's most insidious corrupter of youth" (1984, 127).

5. "Our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing. We have become so engaged with tales of childhood eroticism (molestation, incest, abduction, pornography) that we have come to take for granted the irrepressible allure of children" (Kincaid 1998, 13).

6. Thus, the vampire's bite often combines actual death with orgasm as *la petit mort*.

7. In *Reading the Vampire* (1994, 70, 109), Ken Gelder comments on the "polymorphous" sexuality of the vampire in Stoker's *Dracula* and Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. Freud saw the child as inherently polymorphously perverse, which connects the modern psychoanalytic idea of the child to that of the vampire and the Gothic. See Ellis Hanson (2004, 110).

8. See Pifer (2000, 22–25) and Hanson (2004, 109–10).

such that what is most modern about psychoanalysis seems also most gothic” (Hanson 2004, 110). In addition, vampire children are often beautiful, and they do not physically age, therefore retaining the perfection of youth. In this sense, they passively invite the projection of adult wishes and desire. Hence, the vampire child epitomizes our culture’s ambivalent images of the child as innocent and vulnerable, at the same time as these images eroticize the child and make it alluring. However, children are not only represented as innocent and attractive; media, literature and film are rife with images of the child as demonic, monstrous, or uncanny.<sup>9</sup>

Somtow’s two novels are part of a trilogy, published as well as primarily set in the 1980s and 1990s, featuring vampire child Timmy Valentine.<sup>10</sup> Due to his incomparable soprano voice, he is castrated before he is turned into a vampire almost two millennia ago. Like many other vampires, including Stoker’s Dracula and Lindqvist’s Eli, he is capable of shape-shifting. Although Timmy is not the first vampire child in fiction, he is far more central to Somtow’s trilogy than the mid-1970s vampire children mentioned above are to King’s and Rice’s novels. In addition to this centrality, Somtow’s trilogy is generically innovative in other ways. It is multicultural and transnational in scope, moving effortlessly between different countries in Europe, different parts of the USA, and Thailand, and it engages with various art forms as well as popular culture. In the first novel, Wagnerian opera is a major theme, in the second a film production, and in the third the works of a painter. In all three novels, the chapters are divided into short sections that resemble MTV sound bites, and the trilogy has been categorized as “splatterpunk,” a literary horror genre that is “characterized by the explicit description of horrific, violent, or pornographic scenes” (Oxford University Press 2013).<sup>11</sup> Although *Vampire Junction* has been called a “splatterpunk classic,” the term itself was not coined until 1986.

Splatterpunk is a mocking echo of cyberpunk, the label applied to science fiction’s hard-boiled, high-tech underground movement [...]; it is also a conflation of splatter films (the slang term for excessively violent movies like the ‘Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>’ and ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ series) and punk rock (the willfully crude pop-music revolution sparked in the late 1970’s). (Tucker 1991)

In other words, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the splatterpunk trend stood for a violent, graphically explicit turn of the screw in Gothic horror fiction which, in the case of Somtow’s vampire novels, include children as victims or perpetrators, or as victims *and* perpetrators.

A beautiful boy with an exceptional voice, Somtow’s vampire protagonist, Timmy, has been twelve years old for almost two thousand years. As Hanson points out in his discussion of the 1973 horror film *The Exorcist*, twelve is “an age of sexual transition that has

9. See Ellen Pifer’s *Demon or Doll. Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture* (2000, 14–15).

10. The trilogy ends with S. P. Somtow’s 1995 novel *Vanitas*.

11. See also “Vampire Junction” *Debate.org* (2013) where it is pointed out that in *Vampire Junction* Somtow uses “a novel narrative technique inspired by the rapid intercutting of MTV music videos, and elevate[s] the gore quotient of the horror novel to an unprecedented level by importing the imagery of ‘splatter’ films to the literary novel.” On the book cover, Somtow’s *Valentine* is called the “long-awaited sequel to the splatterpunk classic *Vampire Junction*.” See also Ken Tucker’s “The Splatterpunk Trend, And Welcome to It” (1991). Another interesting vampire novel in this context is Poppy Z. Brite’s *Lost Souls* (1992).



proven irresistible, if not wholly magical, to the popular erotic imagination” (2004, 123). In *Vampire Junction*, Timmy is highly eroticized in the media as a pop idol in ways that verge on perverse: he is “the cutest teen hunk in the whole world, ... adorable, sexy Timmy Valentine ...,” and his image is everywhere: on posters, the cover of magazines, television, and in video games (Somtow 1991, 249). Exploring the pedophilia of everyday life, social philosopher Richard D. Mohr defines a pedophilic image as one in which “youthfulness sexualizes the image and in turn the image enhances the sexiness of youth.” He concludes that “[t]hese images are surprisingly common in [a] society ... [that] careers from hysteria to hysteria over the possible sexiness of children” (2004, 20).<sup>12</sup> Although the images of Timmy appeal most directly to his primary audience, preteen and teenage girls, he is also depicted as sexually attractive to adults.

This sexual attraction is evident in Timmy’s erotically charged relationships with a number of women, such as his aged housekeeper and his middle-aged Jungian psychoanalyst. As these relationships in *Vampire Junction* are often represented in terms of mother and child, they are, to borrow Hanson’s phrasing, “fraught with incestuous undertones,” which, he suggests, are common in “gothic-child narratives [where they] undermine the tenuous distinction between parental love and parental seduction” (Hanson 2004, 121). Timmy’s housekeeper, who “breastfeeds” him while he takes the shape of a wolf, calls him “my master, my child, my lover” (Somtow 1991, 180); and just before deliberately, and with her consent, turning his psychoanalyst into a vampire, Timmy thinks of her as “mother, healer, lover” (Somtow 1991, 314). In Somtow’s novel, the eroticism of the mother-child bond is relentlessly and perversely on display, particularly in Timmy’s sucking of blood from sexually aroused women’s breasts, an act figured in one instance as the image of “an obscene madonna and child” (Somtow 1991, 137).<sup>13</sup>

Pedophilic homosexuality and homoerotic attraction are explored through the narratives of Timmy’s memories. In *Valentine*, for instance, he remembers his encounters with Emperor Hadrian in the year 130 AD, and with the painter Caravaggio at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, two of a number of male historical figures who are depicted as being attracted to the vampire boy. Leonard Heldreth suggests that “[s]eeing the beautiful boy vampire made the object of homoerotic desires and potential abuses by some of the most famous names of history evokes in modern readers the same startling uneasiness that Stoker evoked for Victorian readers [of *Dracula*] in scenes such as the staking of Lucy by her betrothed and his friends” (1999, 127). However, in most cases, including his years in Caravaggio’s Rome, due to his ability to shift shape into different animals and mist, the vampire boy is witness to, rather than a victim of, child sexual abuse, perpetrated, for example, by the painter’s patron, Cardinal del Monte, who is depicted as a grotesque, lewd pedophile with a special interest in boys. Caravaggio is also described as a lover of boys and the perverse; a “mad painter” of “pornographic” images, he ejaculates the first time the vampire boy, in the shape of a cat, feeds on blood from wounds he has suffered in a brawl (Somtow 1993, 62, 73). To the vampire boy’s consternation, Caravaggio appears to see his true form through the illusion of the cat, which makes him

12. See also Sonenschein (1984) on sexualized images of children in the media.

13. Leonard G. Heldreth suggests that “[t]he vampire’s infantile feeding habits, as manifested in a child, appear less threatening to most women than they would in an adult vampire” (1999, 124).

afraid: “When you drink someone’s blood, there’s a bond. It is the bond of hunter and prey ... But with this man I don’t know if I’m hunting or hunted” (Somtow 1993, 73–74). He becomes Caravaggio’s model for the angel of death in the real painting *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, and he continues to drink the painter’s blood. As he literally feeds on the artist, while the artist in turn visually feeds on the child’s beauty and makes him the mythical subject of his painting, the fear that the vampire boy initially feels is replaced by Caravaggio’s fear of him, which – together with the boy’s lack of sexual response and his freedom of movement – prevents the painter from possessing his body, or even having an erection in his presence (Somtow 1993, 136, 137). As Heldreth observes, “While Timmy’s apparent innocence, soprano voice, and boyish beauty make him the ultimate object for any pedophile, his castration, lack of passion, and ability to melt away into mist make him completely unattainable ...” (1999, 127). The vampire boy is no easy physical prey for homosexual pedophiles, although he feeds their fantasies.

Being a vampire does not, however, save Timmy from becoming the victim of a homicidal pedophile, Gilles de Rais, a real-life French knight, known as Bluebeard, with a reputation for killing children. Like hundreds of mortal boys suffering torture and murderous sexual abuse, the vampire boy – incapacitated by the silver and crucifixes in Gilles de Rais’ castle – is stabbed in the stomach and sexually violated by Bluebeard, who revels in being the epitome of evil: “I will prove to you my utter depravity – I will demonstrate the epic and monumental nature of my personal evil!” (Somtow 1991, 274). This encounter with Bluebeard, and the horrors of his castle, induces a sense of compassion in the vampire boy and makes him question his own existence for the first time in almost fourteen hundred years. It ultimately leads to him having a psychological breakdown that lasts for over a hundred years, and, in the twentieth century, it is the last, most repressed memory Timmy and his psychoanalyst arrive at during their therapy sessions in *Vampire Junction*.

As well as serving as a vehicle for a history of pederastic perversions, Timmy is thus in many ways a heightened illustration of the “the erotic enigma that is the modern child” (Hanson 2004, 109). This notion of the child emerges at the *fin de siècle* as epitomized in Freud’s psychoanalytic theories: “The sexual child is a figure rich in paradox, at once familiar and strange, naïve and knowing, transparent and inscrutable, docile and dangerous, innocent and guilty” (Hanson 2004, 134–35).<sup>14</sup> In *Vampire Junction*, Timmy is at times described as “primally innocent.” However, in *Valentine*, Timmy makes the seemingly paradoxical statement that serves as an epigraph to this article: “when I lost my innocence I also lost my capacity for evil” (Somtow 1993, 128). This statement critiques the common assumption that innocence is necessarily good and the opposite of evil that is often implied in representations of ‘the child.’ For Timmy, it is when he loses his unreflecting and unemotional innocence in his encounter with Gilles de Rais that he loses his “capacity for evil” – severely traumatized, he questions his own existence as a blood-sucking creature. Moreover, although Timmy’s knowledge and experience of the world encompass almost two millennia, due to the double restrictions of being castrated and a vampire child, he is incapable of physical maturation and penetrative genital sexual intercourse. He hovers between sexual savvy and a childish impotence, which sometimes causes him to commit murderous violence.

14. See also Hanson (2004, 109–10) and Pifer (2000, 23).

One occasion for such violence born out of frustration is Timmy's first encounter with Lisa, a tragic child figure in *Vampire Junction* who lacks his glamour and agency. Lisa has run away from her Bluebeardian father, who locked her away in a room with a television set as her only company. She is simultaneously innocent and corrupted, with no experience of the world, with the exception of being raped and abused by her father and watching feature films and celebrity shows on television. The abuse, and her erroneous perception of television as a true representation of the world, have led to a severely distorted sense of reality. She stalks Timmy because he is a celebrity, and she believes – as she tells him – that he will make her “rich and famous” if she does the “daddy thing” with him (Somtow 1991, 99). Encountering her at the swimming pool in his house, Timmy senses her loneliness and understands what has happened to her. She strips and reveals signs of how her father has physically abused her: among other things, a scar across one of her breasts. Timmy dares to undress, too, but when she discovers that he has no testicles, she taunts him and expresses doubts that he really is Timmy Valentine, the celebrity. As she does this, Timmy, in a fit of frustration mixed with compassion, attacks her in the shape of a shark – *Jaws* being her favorite movie – and turns her into a vampire. As a vampire, Lisa gains power and agency, but no keener sense of reality, and she makes killing into a kind of grotesque art, decorating her victims' severed body parts with seaweed.

The staking of Lisa, performed by her compassionate uncle Brian, is a parallel to the staking of Lucy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In both cases, the staking of the female vampire – represented as a phallic act, indeed – underlines what is at stake sexually: in the case of Stoker's Lucy, unbridled female sexuality; in the case of Somtow's Lisa, incest and child sexual abuse.<sup>15</sup> Brian, who knows what his brother Mark has done to Lisa, searches for her and hopes to be able to save her from further abuse. To his dismay, he discovers that she is now a vampire, which leads him to assume the role of vampire slayer. His staking of Lisa is deeply disturbing, and it is the only section of *Vampire Junction* represented as stream-of-consciousness with no punctuation. This narrative technique underscores how Brian's memory of discovering his brother's sexual abuse of Lisa is amplified by and caught up with his own action. As Brian stakes her, she is screaming “like a child, an abused child”:

and he remembered stumbling into the dark room and discovering his brother's hideous secret and the girl screaming for him to stop and he hated himself for making her scream and it made him feel like his brother *stop hurting the girl you asshole stop it stop it* and she didn't stop screaming even when he pulled Mark off her and punched him in the face and saw the blood spurt from his nose and now the same scream again and again and he was his brother and holding up the stake and pounding and pounding and his brother thrusting and thrusting and the stake riving the girl-flesh and the blood bursting out and his brother coming and blood spurting from his nose and his brother thrusting and the stake driving down and the same scream again and the blood bursting and his brother coming bursting coming bursting – (Somtow 1991, 192)

15. Heldreth observes of Somtow's trilogy as a whole that “[t]he sexual and social fears of the nineteenth century's *fin-de-siècle* years, identified by many critics as the major substructure in *Dracula*, are replaced in the trilogy by the sexual phobias of the last decades of the twentieth century – homoeroticism, pedophilia, and child abuse” (1999, 121).



How this experience affects Brian is further emphasized much later in the novel when his death wish is explained: “It was what he had longed for ever since he’d pierced his niece’s heart and envisioned himself as Mark, and had known himself capable of the very act he most abhorred” (Somtow 1991, 349). Through the staking of Lisa, he has gained insight into his own incestuous desire.

Incest as child abuse also plays a central role in *Valentine*, but here the focus is on incestuous mother-son relationships. In general, representations of mother-son incest are much less common in fiction and elsewhere than father-daughter incest,<sup>16</sup> enhancing the transgressive, shocking qualities of this novel. In particular, Somtow depicts the debilitating effects of incest on Angel Todd,<sup>17</sup> who plays Timmy in the film about his recent pop-star career and who, as his double, exchanges identity, and his mortality, with Timmy, in an uncanny reversal at the end of the novel.

Thirteen-year-old Angel’s problems hinge on his own and his mother’s sexuality. One of the other adult female characters describes him as “a grownup in a child’s body. ... And he had something that Timmy Valentine didn’t have – a barely submerged adolescent sexuality, smouldering, raring to erupt” (Somtow 1993, 11). In a discussion of the 2008 Swedish film adaptation of Lindqvist’s *Let the Right One In*, John Calhoun observes that “[p]recociousness of manner is a hallmark of the child monster ...” (2009, 29), and Angel is nothing if not precocious. However, he is also deeply distressed, and silently agonizes about what his mother makes him do even as he auditions for the part as Timmy: “*My mother made me fuck her*” (Somtow 1993, 104). Angel’s mother is a hapless and clinging alcoholic, but he also half-remembers a twin brother whose death many years ago somehow seems to be his mother’s fault – his mother may actually have murdered his brother, or at least caused his death. Hence, Angel regards his mother as both suffocating and monstrous; he generalizes: “Mothers breathe life into you but then it’s like they become vampires and they suck the life from you over and over but you can’t say nothing because it’s the same life they breathed into you in the first place” (Somtow 1993, 104–05). In his view, mothers are thus both givers and destroyers of life. Angel’s apprehension about his mother and the shame he experiences prevent him from divulging the terrible secret of incest, which weighs heavily on him: “I wish I could tell about momma. About the things she makes me do. I wish I could tell *someone*” (Somtow 1993, 246). When he finally manages to speak to adults whom he trusts about the incest, he casts his mother as a predator and himself as prey: “My mother does terrible things to me. I think she’s sucking my soul away” (Somtow 1993, 270). In Angel’s verbalization of his mother’s abuse, she is the active perpetrator and he is the passive victim. His earlier ruminations on the subject, though, revolve around what his

16. The only other literary example that comes to mind is the mother-son incest in John Irving’s *In One Person* (2013), but there the son is a minor (but important) character. This scarcity in fiction appears to reflect the relative rarity of real cases of this type of incest: in her book *Father-Daughter Incest*, psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman remarks that “Incest between mother and son is so extraordinary that a single case is considered worthy of publication, and we have been able to find a grand total of only twenty-two documented cases in the entire literature” (2000, 18).

17. Herman maintains, “At the time of our original study, in the mid-1970s, there was virtually no scientific literature on the psychological impact of incest,” and “We did not fully appreciate the profound effects of incest on the developing child’s mind and body; nor did we understand the complex range of adaptations to an environment of fear, secrecy, and betrayal” (2000, 224, 225).

mother makes *him* do, which means that what troubles him the most is his active, however unwilling, participation in the incestuous sexual intercourse.

Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In* (2004) does not deal with incest,<sup>18</sup> but there are a number of features that connect this vampire novel with Somtow's *Vampire Junction* and *Valentine* – despite its pervading mode of everyday realism, and its Swedish domestic setting and vampire: a Stockholm suburb in the early 1980s and a vampire child, who originally – two hundred years ago – comes from a small town close to Stockholm. *Let the Right One In* includes revolting scenes that have much in common with the splatterpunk aspects of Somtow's vampire trilogy, and I will examine one of those scenes below.<sup>19</sup> Pertinent to my discussion are also the similarities between Lindqvist's vampire child Eli and Somtow's Timmy. Like Timmy, Eli is eternally twelve years old, since he was turned into a vampire at that age, and he was also castrated before becoming a vampire. Indeed, Eli does not have any genitalia, only a scar. Like Timmy, he is small and beautiful; his appearance is actually so androgynous that everybody who meets him believes that he is a girl – including the main character Oskar, the prepubescent bullied boy who befriends and falls in love with Eli, and finally runs away with him.<sup>20</sup>

Eli defies categorizations, embodies dichotomous traits, and exhibits a number of transgressive qualities, which contributes to the novel's uncanny effects and which, as Sofia Wijkmark observes, makes him fit the definition of a monster. Lindqvist's vampire, she points out, transgresses boundaries “between life and death, man and woman, human and beast, child and ancient, angel and demon” (2012, 9; my translation). Issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, and age figure in Oskar and Eli's budding romantic relationship, which includes Eli leaving notes with quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* in Oskar's room. The first time they lie next to each other in bed, Oskar asks Eli if they could “go out together.” Eli replies, “I'm not a girl,” and goes on to define himself in negative terms: “I'm nothing. Not a child. Not old. Not a boy. Not a girl. Nothing” (Lindqvist 2009, 188).<sup>21</sup> The imminent crisis in their relationship is averted when he understands that what Oskar has in mind has nothing to do with sexual relations and that their relationship will basically remain what it already is. Although Oskar tries to discuss the issue of same-sex love with a teacher, and also asks if it is possible to be both a girl and a boy at the same time, or neither, it is not until after he has discovered that Eli is a vampire (Lindqvist 2009, 248), and after Eli has told him

18. It could be argued, though, that *Let the Right One In* depicts a pseudo-incestuous relationship as Håkan publicly acts as Eli's father.

19. Lindqvist's interest in splatter aesthetics is also very much apparent in his fourth novel, *Little Star* (*Lilla stjärna* 2010), which also deals with children – this time girls – as victims and perpetrators. For an excellent discussion of this novel's relation to splatter films, see Wijkmark (2014).

20. Another striking feature that *Let the Right One In* shares with both *Vampire Junction* and *Valentine* is that, in all three novels, the vampire child ends up in a train together with one or more people who care for him. However, unlike Timmy in *Vampire Junction* and Angel Todd in *Valentine*, who both travel with a man and a woman – surrogate parents – on a mythical train with no certain destination, Eli, hidden in an old-fashioned trunk, is on his way to Karlstad accompanied by Oskar.

21. Eli's describing himself in negative terms resonates with the way the Romantic child was defined first and foremost in terms of what it did not have in contrast to adults: “The child was figured as *free of adult corruptions; not yet burdened with the weight of responsibility, mortality, and sexuality: liberated from 'the light of common day'*” (Kincaid 1998, 15). This way of constructing the child as a malleable emptiness, Kincaid argues, is still common today.

that his real name is “Elias” (Lindqvist 2009, 320), that Oskar has to confront the question: “Was Eli a boy? They had ... kissed and slept in the same bed and ...” (Lindqvist 2009, 339). On a later occasion when Eli changes clothes, Oskar perceives that “[b]etween the legs she had ... nothing. No slit, no penis. Just a smooth surface” (Lindqvist 2009, 384). Eli’s earlier assertion about being nothing is thus corroborated by his lack of female and male genitalia. Moreover, in this chapter of *Let the Right One In*, the pronouns referring to Eli change from feminine to masculine,<sup>22</sup> and in the rest of the novel Eli is referred to as “he” instead of “she.”

The monstrosity of Eli is not actually related to his gender-bending and sexuality, though, but to his feeding habits and dependence on other people’s blood. Vampirism in *Let the Right One In* is an infection that means that the infected human who turns into a vampire serves as a host to a parasitical organism that craves blood and keeps the host alive indefinitely. In a rare encounter with an adult vampire woman, Eli learns that there are not many vampires since most people commit suicide rather than live on interminably as bloodsucking predators. Eli ponders why he has chosen survival over suicide: “Maybe it was because he was a child. Maybe that was why he hadn’t put an end to it. The pangs of conscience were weaker than his will to live” (Lindqvist 2009, 426). Hence, Eli survives as a predator precisely because he is a child. Within this context ‘the child’ is constructed as a being of base animalistic instinct over human rationale and morality. When he and Oskar play in the basement of an apartment building, Eli refuses to be the beautiful maiden that Oskar will save from the monster: “Eli was a terrible monster who ate beautiful maidens for lunch and she was the one he would have to fight” (Lindqvist 2009, 232). The literalness of Eli’s role-playing becomes evident when Oskar wants the two of them to make a pact sealed with blood and quickly cuts his hand so his blood drips on the floor, which turns Eli into “the monster they had recently pretended that she was ...” (Lindqvist 2009, 234). Crouching on the floor and licking the blood, Eli orders Oskar to leave, or he will die. Adding to his monstrous qualities, Eli has the ability to metamorphose and assume various animal characteristics; for instance, someone who witnesses his feeding on a woman maintains, “the child who had attacked her had not been a human being. ... [I]t had fangs and claws” (Lindqvist 2009, 259). As a shape-shifting bloodthirsty predator, the representation of Eli blurs the boundary not only between the human and the animal, but the *child* and the predator, which amplifies his monstrosity.

On other occasions Eli is seen as an angel. In two instances this view of him is actually connected to his shape-shifting: when he visits Håkan in the hospital, and at the end of the novel when he saves Oskar from the bullies trying to kill him in the swimming pool. In both cases, he has wings. An old man arriving at the hospital sees Eli fly away: “It was the angel of death. The angel of death. I will never leave this place alive” (Lindqvist 2009, 292). The angel of death is an ambiguous and evocative figure, which Somtow also alludes to in *Vampire Junction* and *Valentine*: with Caravaggio seeing and painting Timmy in this role; during Bluebeard’s conversations with Timmy; and with the aptly named Angel Todd – who turns into a relentless angel of death in the third novel of the trilogy, *Vanitas* (1995).

22. This strategy (in reverse) is used in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) to mark the sex change of the protagonist in the middle of that novel.

Eli's rescue of Oskar in the swimming pool, which results in the death of two of the bullies, is only represented indirectly in the "Epilogue" through a police officer pondering his notes based on the interviews with the boys who had witnessed the incident: "Their accounts basically matched up, and one word had turned up frequently: angel" (Lindqvist 2009, 517). Eli as rescuing angel actually appears in two different contexts in the novel. The first is in Håkan's fantasy, when he is trapped waiting to be apprehended by the police in the locker room at the pool on one of his missions to acquire blood for his "beloved." As Håkan is about to throw acid on his own face to cover up his identity:

He conjured up the image of his beloved as an angel. A boy angel flying down from heaven, spreading his wings, who was going to pick him up. Carry him off. Take him to a place where they would always be together. (Lindqvist 2009, 141)

The later swimming pool incident – when Eli in fact swoops down in the shape of an avenging angel, kills Oskar's assailants and saves his life, after which they run away together by taking the train to Karlstad – is more or less an enactment of Håkan's fantasy, with Oskar standing in for Håkan, the pedophile.

Ironically, in view of Eli and Oskar's destination, Håkan had been a Swedish teacher at a school in Karlstad until someone "tipped off the other neighbours about what kind of mail, what kind of videos he received" (Lindqvist 2009, 236). This disclosure of him as a pedophile wreaks havoc on Håkan's life: he loses his home, his job, and his dignity. It is important to him that Eli is a boy and not a girl, which is why he imagines him as a *boy* angel. Håkan's pedophilic leanings are exclusively directed towards boys, and twelve-year-old boys are the ones to whom he is most attracted. He regards himself as an aesthete and sometimes casts his boy-loving in literary and historical terms: for example, in the hospital he thinks about "Socrates and the jar of poison. Because he had seduced the youth of Athens. Don't forget to offer a rooster to ... what was he called? Archimandros? No ..." (Lindqvist 2009, 191).<sup>23</sup> His aesthetic sensibilities, or possibly his scruples, prevent him from taking sexual advantage of a Vietnamese boy who services three other pedophiles in a sordid room – here he "only" watches – and he refrains from the services of an Eastern-European immigrant boy in the lavatories of the public library in Stockholm. To Håkan, Eli is perfect since he is eternally twelve years old, beautiful, and still older than any human child. However, although he lives with Eli, Håkan has to negotiate even the slightest touch and pay for it in advance by providing Eli with fresh blood – which proves to be difficult, since Håkan is not very adept at finding and killing suitable victims.

Nevertheless, when transformed into the undead, Håkan is the epitome of the pedophile as ruthless predator, governed exclusively by his cravings: a brain-dead monster with a constant erection. It is also in Håkan's doings as a mangled but continuously sexually aroused monster that *Let the Right One In* most clearly employs images and scenes that can be associated with splatterpunk. When Håkan finally traps Eli in the basement shelter of an apartment building, Eli does not know what to expect; Håkan is "undead" and more of a

23. The name Håkan is looking for is Asclepius, the god of medicine. He also seems to be mistaken about the reason for Socrates taking poison: the implication here is that Socrates physically seduced the youth of Athens, whereas the charge was that he had corrupted their minds.

zombie than a vampire. At first, Eli is uncharacteristically afraid of this grotesque version of his former helper, who emits “an overpowering sense of threat”; but then he begins to believe that, like a vampire, Håkan needs an invitation to be able to enter the room. When he sees Håkan’s erection and that he starts to masturbate, Eli laughs and forgets about being afraid: “Eli imagined one of those obscene dolls that you wound up with a key; a monk whose cape went up and he started masturbating as long as the mechanism allowed” (Lindqvist 2009, 431–32). Amused, Eli fails to notice that Håkan enters uninvited until he receives a brutal blow that half severs one of his ears from his head. There follows an extended, graphically depicted violent rape scene focalized through the rape victim – the vampire child – who is “being handled, like an object” (Lindqvist 2009, 433). The physical damage this monstrous pedophilic rapist does to Eli is carefully recorded: “Something was rubbing a ball of ice across the thin skin between his buttocks. Something tried, first poking, then thrusting, to force its way into him” (Lindqvist 2009, 433). Eli’s face is first covered by the dress he is wearing, but when it blows aside he sees that Håkan is lying on top of him.

His only eye was staring fixedly at Eli’s spread buttocks. His hands were locked around Eli’s ankles, whose legs had been brutally bent back so that his knees were pressed to the ground on either side of his shoulders. When Håkan pressed harder, Eli heard how the tendons in the back of his own thighs broke like tightly pulled strings. (Lindqvist 2009, 433)

A severely injured Eli eventually manages to escape by blinding his undead assailant with a pointy broomstick; this act and its aftermath are also depicted in graphic splatterpunk detail. In this basement encounter between the undead Håkan and Eli, the vampire child is configured as the prey of a violent adult sexual predator.

To conclude, Somtow’s and Lindqvist’s vampire protagonists are brutally injured by adults in ways that would have killed a human child: Timmy by the fifteenth-century pedophile/necrophile Gilles de Rais, and Eli by the undead pedophile Håkan. These protagonists, as well as Somtow’s Lisa and Angel Todd, are child figures eroticized and sexualized in ways that break taboos that have gained in urgency since the end of the 1970s and that are now firmly in place in our society and culture: pedophilia, incest, and child sexual abuse. That vampire fiction feeds on and breaks taboos is nothing new, as my references to Stoker’s *Dracula* have indicated, and it seems appropriate that vampire novels belonging to the Gothic horror variety should pick up on what is currently considered society’s worst nightmare: child sexual abuse with the pedophile as the ultimate predator. However, the vampire children in Somtow’s and Lindqvist’s novels are not only abused and preyed upon by adults; they are also predators and killers. Embodying and breaking down this lethal opposition, as well as a host of other dichotomies, the vampire child is an extraordinarily uncanny figure in Gothic fiction.

The successful marrying of gritty realism, pedophilia, and vampirism in *Let the Right One In* initiated a Swedish Gothic boom in the first decades of the twenty-first century with Lindqvist at the forefront – a boom that has reverberated far beyond the country’s borders. By focusing on a pre-teen vampire child and by employing splatterpunk elements, like Somtow did in the 1980s and 1990s, Lindqvist offers an alternative trajectory for the figure



of the sympathetic vampire, and one that is very different from that of Harris's and Meyer's paranormal romance variety of vampire fiction.

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