

“The Gas Bombs and the Disease and the Flying Pestilences”: Beaumont’s “Place of a Meeting” as a Depiction of the American Reality in the 1940’s and the Early 1950’s

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Abstract: *The vampire figure has been present in Western culture for centuries and its popularity has been steadily increasing. The vampire can be viewed as a universal shapeshifter who skilfully adapts to the pressing issues and challenging questions of the time. Through the figure of the vampire people express not only their utmost fears, doubts, and anxieties, but also their hidden temptations and desires. Beaumont’s 1953 vampire story “Place of a Meeting” depicts a post-apocalyptic deserted world where vampires mourn the loss of human life thus becoming a representation of the cultural and historical landscape of the United States in the 1940’s and the early 1950’s.*

Keywords: VAMPIRE, PLACE OF A MEETING, APOCALYPSE, WAR, BOMBS

The vampire has become a staple of Western European and North American culture and haunts every sphere of life in Western society. Vampires lurk between the pages of works of literature, drive the plotlines of films, inspire clothing lines and cosmetic product, live in the worlds of politics and economics, and bring to life works of art. The figure of the vampire entered Western Europe from the Slavic lands in the 17th century and since then has been one of the most skilled cultural shapeshifters that has adapted to the changing times and has never lost its popularity and appeal. One possible explanation for this is that the vampire in Western culture has become a way for people to express, discuss, and speculate on their relevant fears, doubts, anxieties, and hidden, even forbidden, desires. Vampires often give “flesh and blood” to difficult, confusing, even unanswerable pressing questions that push society to venture into unknown and frightening, but also tempting territories. This paper focuses on Charles Beaumont’s 1953 vampire story “Place of a Meeting” as a representation of the cultural, political, and economic turmoil that American society faced in the 1940’s and the early 1950’s. In Beaumont’s story the vampires do not play the anticipated role of the antagonist. Rather, they serve three important functions: to tell the devastating story of yet another man-made apocalypse; to portray the emotions that a lifeless world covered by a “poison cloud” (Beaumont 326) would invoke; and to raise important questions about the current situation in the United States, the world, and the future of humanity.

When reading Stoker’s *Dracula* or watching “Twilight,” it is easy to disregard the fact that the modern Western vampire is a descendant of the Slavic vampire. According to Perkowski “both the word vampire and the demon to which it refers were introduced by the Slavs almost one thousand years ago” (18) and Melton points out that “while vampires and vampirelike creatures appeared in the mythology of many of the world’s peoples, nowhere were they more prevalent than among the Slavs of eastern and central Europe” (641). A. N. Afanas’ev describes the Slavic vampire the following way:

they are corpses who during their lifetime had been sorcerers, werewolves and, in general, people excommunicated by the church such as: suicides, drunkards, heretics, apostates and those cursed by their parents... At the dead of midnight, leaving their graves where they lie as undecayed corpses, the vampires take on various forms. They... raise Cain and frighten travelers or they enter the peasants’ cottages and suck blood from those sleeping, who always die from it afterwards... The pre-dawn cock’s crow compels the vampire to disappear instantaneously or forces him to the ground blood-stained and completely unconscious. (Perkowski 19)

According to Felix Oinas “vampires are occasionally considered responsible for hardships that befall households and even whole villages: bringing on a drought, causing storms, crop failures, livestock plagues, and diseases” (Oinas 49). At the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century the Slavs inhabiting lands located on the borders of the Austro-Hungarian empire experienced several “vampire epidemics” characterized mainly by perceivably healthy

people and cattle suddenly becoming ill and dying quickly afterwards. The panic-stricken population blamed these events on vampires, which resulted in graves being opened and dead bodies being mutilated or annihilated. The stories of these terrifying and controversial cases traveled to Western Europe, which as Melton points out “led directly to the development of the contemporary vampire myth” (641). Scholars such as Barber, Groom, Melton, and Perkowski have pointed to some of the most famous Slavic “vampire” cases that initially infiltrated and circulated through Western Europe such as the cases of Arnold Paole and Peter Plogojowitz. Ultimately, Arnold Paole and Peter Plogojowitz became the not-so-glamorous great-grandfathers of Stoker’s Count Dracula.

While Perkowski discusses the role of the vampire as a scapegoat—a much needed supernatural explanation for inexplicable natural events, other scholars such as Groom point to the fact that the vampire is intrinsically connected to the relevant cultural, historical, political, and economic events of the time. Groom’s *The Vampire: A New History* traces the development of the vampire figure in Western Europe from the 17th century to the present by relating the vampire to major events in terms of religion, politics, economics, medicine, public health, psychology, technological development, crime, environmentalism, and the understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality. With this in mind, the vampire figure can be analyzed as an embodiment of people’s relevant and unresolved fears, questions, and even temptations. In this manner, Charles Beaumont’s short vampire story “Place of a Meeting” (1953) becomes a mirror that reflects the anxieties of the American society triggered by the events that the United States faced in the 1940’s and the early 1950’s.

The 1940’s and the early 1950’s were a time of turmoil for the United States defined by war, fear, loss, and chaos. The American people faced “World War II, the Holocaust, atomic bombs, and the beginning of the Cold War” (“The 1940s”). The United States entered World War II as a result of the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7th 1941 and suffered a total of 418,500 (military and civilian) deaths during the war (“Research Starters”). Japan’s unexpected attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii either wounded or took away the lives of more than 3,500 US troops and civilians. In addition, the attack “severely damaged the fleet...and shocked the nation” (“Remembering Pearl”). Following the Pearl Harbor attack, in the United States “for several years there had been dissent among scientists and political leaders over the morality and necessity of using atomic bombs” and in 1945 President Truman faced difficult decisions pertaining to the United States’ plans to use atomic bombs against Japan (“The Story”). Eventually, in July, 1945 the United States proceeded with conducting “Trinity”—the first ever live test of a nuclear detonation. About a month later, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan and thus became the first and only country to use atomic bombs against another country. On August 6, 1945 “Little Boy” was dropped on Hiroshima. As a result, a big part of the city was destroyed and around 140,000 people died. Three days later, on August 9, 1945 “Fat Man” was dropped on Nagasaki

causing around 70,000 deaths ("The Story"). The number of deaths in Hiroshima and Nagasaki provided does not account for the number of people that died after the attacks from radiation-related illnesses.

In addition, the late 1940's and the early 1950's marked the dawn of the Cold War, "a period of geopolitical tension marked by competition and confrontation between communist nations led by the Soviet Union and Western democracies including the United States" ("Cold War"). For the United States the beginning of the Cold War was tied to heightened arms buildup, plans to create "superbombs," fear of nuclear destruction, the Red Scare, and the Korean War. When the Soviet Union tested their own atomic bomb in 1949, President Truman declared that "the United States would build an even more destructive atomic weapon: the hydrogen bomb, or 'superbomb'" ("Cold War"). Both the Soviet Union and the United States conducted multiple tests of powerful radioactive bombs. The persistent threat of nuclear attacks had a devastating effect on the everyday lives of the American citizens. Public spaces such as schools conducted nuclear attack drills; people were building bomb shelters in their backyards and the government was building bomb shelters for the political elite in top secret locations around the country; the film industry flooded the market with movies portraying the nightmarish effects of nuclear weapons and mass destruction ("Cold War").

In addition to the ever-present fear of nuclear annihilation, starting in 1947 the American people also faced the Red Scare with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) launching "a series of hearings designed to show that communist subversion in the United States was alive and well" ("Cold War"). The actions and the politics of the HUAC committee during the late 1940s and the 1950s, which can be defined as an "anticommunist hysteria," resulted in more than 500 "blacklisted" Hollywood actors, directors, and writers staying unemployed for a decade, thousands of federal employees being "investigated, fired and even prosecuted," professors with liberal views being fired, people testifying against their coworkers, and "loyalty oaths" becoming more and more common ("Cold War").

Even though the United States and the Soviet Union never engaged in direct military actions against one other, in 1950 the Cold War led the United States into sending troops to North Korea. The Korean War, also referred to by the United States as the "Forgotten War," lasted for about three years and around 36,600 American soldiers lost their lives ("Korean War"). The Korean War was "difficult to fight and unpopular domestically" ("NSC-68"). The American public perceived the war as pointless, especially given the stalled negotiations. The citizens' widespread dissatisfaction with the Korean War became one of the factors that destroyed President Truman's public support and led to the election of General Dwight D. Eisenhower as the next American President ("NSC-68").

As demonstrated, the 1940's and the early 1950's remained in American history as times of turmoil, violence, fear, and dissatisfaction. Charles Beaumont's short vampire story "Place of a Meeting" (1953) becomes an accurate depiction of the state of American society at that time. Beaumont (1929-1967), a Chicago-born writer, published "Place of a Meeting" for a first time in *Orbit* no. 2 (Beaumont 323). The story cleverly strays away from using popular themes, motifs, and elements from earlier well-known vampire-focused works by Polidori, Le Fanu, Poe, Goethe, Byron, and Keats, and presents an unusual and unexpected take on the vampire trope. Beaumont's reader does not encounter ghostly castles, mysterious red-eyed counts, unsuspecting and vulnerable maidens, or irresistible, but deadly she-vampires. "Place of a Meeting" shows vampires in a different light—as the only (and lonely) survivors of a devastating global man-made apocalypse. In many vampire-focused works of literature the world of the living has a rather unpleasant encounter with death through its interactions with the world of the (un)dead, represented by the vampire figure. These encounters have one recurring pattern—the world of the

(un)dead, represented by the vampire, uses various means with the goal of draining the life force out of the world of the living, represented by the human. Sometimes these attempts are successful and sometimes they are not. Regardless, in most classic vampire-focused works of literature the (un)dead, the vampire, can be defined as the antagonist, and the human can be defined the protagonist. In Beaumont's story the vampires are not the antagonists and the people are not the protagonists; both the vampires and the people are victims of powerful weapons of mass destruction that have turned the world into a lifeless desert.

It is worth pointing out that Beaumont never specifically refers to the group that meets at the graveyard as "vampires"; he refers to them throughout the text either by their names or as "people." The author only gives subtle hints throughout the story based on which the reader realizes that Big Jim Kroner and his acquaintances are undead blood-drinkers. These hints include the group meeting at a graveyard, the group's concern over nourishment once they realize all people are dead, references to "new blood" (Beaumont 326) and building up appetite, their "pale cheeks and red lips" (Beaumont 326) and "bloodless" hands (Beaumont 326), the air turning black and getting filled with "flappings and...flutterings and...squeakings" (Beaumont 326) when the group is leaving, Jim Kroner not looking at crosses, and Jim Kroner getting into his coffin, closing the lid, and going to sleep until the world gets populated again.

Beaumont's "Place of a Meeting" captures the American reality of the 1940's and early 1950's by using the vampire figure to develop the theme of mass destruction on a global scale. The atmosphere that Beaumont creates in his work is similar to what many Americans felt and saw every day at that time—loneliness, hopelessness, and decay:

the wind had died, again, so there was no sound at all. Across the corroded wire fence the gray meadows lay strewn with the carcasses of cows and horses and, in one of the fields, sheep. No flies buzzed near the dead animals; there were no maggots burrowing. No vultures; the sky was clean of birds. And in all the intended rolling hills of grass and weeds which had once sung and pulsed with a million voices, in all the land there was only this immense stillness now, still as years, still as the unheard motion of the stars." (Beaumont 325)

The conflicts that the United States faced in the 1940's and the early 1950's were on a global scale and it is no accident that in Beaumont's story Jim Kroner's group includes participants from multiple cultures that speak various languages. The participants are responsible for covering and searching different parts of the world with the hope of finding people that are still alive. However, when asked if they found anybody alive, the vampires give the same devastating answer: "They're all dead" (Beaumont 324), "...Ain't nobody alive in the whole state" (Beaumont 325), "'No,' she said. 'No, no.'" (Beaumont 325), "...Nothin' nowhere" (Beaumont 325), "Everywhere is people dead" (Beaumont 325), "All dead, senior chief" (Beaumont 325), "Dead as doornails" (Beaumont 325), "...there was much head-shaking, many people saying, 'No, no.'" (Beaumont 325).

Beaumont's vivid description of the group's reaction once they realize that there is no human life left anywhere becomes a powerful depiction of a world that is no longer fragmented, divided, and territorial; Beaumont's world is united, but the unifying factor is its shared terror and helplessness in the face of the irreversible evil the devastating scope of which it had just realized: "He watched all the tall and short and old and young people from all over the world, pressed together now, a vast silent polyglot in this country meeting place..." (Beaumont 325). Beaumont's reason for this irreversible evil is entirely in line with people's real-life fears and anxieties related to the "atomic age," nuclear power, "superbombs," and the deadly effects of the explosions that not only destroy lives immediately, but cause illnesses, suffering, and death for decades: "...the gas bombs and the disease and the flying pestilences that had covered the earth in three days and three nights" (Beaumont 325). The graveyard where the vampires have

gathered, "...a country meeting place...always lonely and long-deserted" (Beaumont 325), becomes a microcosm that represents Beaumont's "deserted" (Beaumont 325) and "forgotten" (Beaumont 325) post-bomb reality in which carcasses, "dead trees" (Beaumont 326), "odors of rotting life" (Beaumont 324), and "the still-hanging poison cloud" (Beaumont 326) paint the landscape of a world defined by the piercing *absence of life*. Even though Jim Kroner and his group resemble living people—they talk, move, think, and feel—and thus might give the reader some hope that the world is not as empty and forgotten as they thought at first, Beaumont reminds his reader that this resemblance is deceiving, as Jim Kroner and his group are (un)dead and thus lifeless: "His voice was steady, but it lacked life" (Beaumont 326). Beaumont skillfully places the reader and the vampires on the same emotional plane in the midst of a deserted post-apocalyptic world defined by overarching death and silence; both the reader and the vampires feel shocked, frightened, sad, lost, and overwhelmingly alone: "A girl began to cry. She sank to the damp ground, and covered her face and made these crying sounds...The elderly man looked sad. But not afraid" (Beaumont 325), "'The world's all dead,' a child moaned" (326), "Monsieur Kroner, Monsieur Kroner, what will we do?" (Beaumont 326).

The ending of Beaumont's story points to the cyclical nature of history, which, unfortunately, has not helped humanity learn from its mistakes; rather than noting and consciously avoiding past devastating events, people continue to destroy life time and time again. This is evident in Kroner's response when the group asks him what they should do given that there are no living people anywhere in the world. Kroner states:

Do? What some of us have done before... We'll go back and wait. It ain't the first time. It ain't the last... Same thing we'll do again and likely keep on doing. We'll go back and—sleep. And we'll wait. Then it'll start all over again and folks will build their cities—new folks with new blood—and then we'll wake up. (Beaumont 326)

The fact that Kroner has witnessed most of human history and the perpetual vicious cycles of life destruction and revitalization is demonstrated by the way Beaumont describes his hands: "...large hands, rough from the stone of midnight pyramids and the feel of muskets, boil-specked from night hours in packing plants and trucking lines; broken by the impact of a tomahawk and a machine-gun bullet...Old hands, old beyond years" (Beaumont 326). The ending of the story leaves the reader with the image of Kroner sleeping in his coffin under the foliage in a once again deserted and quiet graveyard in a once again deserted and quiet post-apocalyptic world where life shall blossom once again, only to be destroyed yet once again.

Beaumont's short story "Place of a Meeting" (1953) becomes a representation of the social, cultural, and political atmosphere in the United States in the 1940's and the early 1950's. World War II, the Cold War, and the Korean War made "war" one of the most frequently used words by the American people. The government not only tested, but actively deployed the destructive power of nuclear energy, leaders spoke of "superbombs," and the public watched radioactive explosions and horrifying mutants on the big screen, while building bomb shelters and going through emergency drills on daily basis. Additionally, people were fired, investigated, and prosecuted because of their alleged political beliefs and affiliations. During the 1940's and the early 1950's war in various shapes and forms abrasively invaded the lives of the American people and took away not only their loved ones, but also their sense of peace, safety, order, and trust. They vampires in Beaumont's story not only tell the devastating story of yet another man-made apocalypse and portray the emotions that a lifeless world covered by a "poison cloud" (Beaumont 326) would invoke; they also raise important questions about the current situation in the United States, the world, and the future of humanity related to bombs and "superbombs," war and mass destruction, violence and hate, irreversible loss and painful fear, piercing silence, and the challenging lessons that humanity sadly refuses to learn.

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Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission.