“Everything About You Is Vampiric”: Vampirism as a Metaphor for Adolescent Maturation in M. T. Anderson’s *Thirsty*

Leni Marlina

State University of Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia

Over the past few years, vampire genre has populated young adult (YA) literature. YA literature can be defined as narratives about the individual growth and maturation of adolescent protagonist. Adolescence is the bridging process of growing from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, it is a turbulent time of rapid physical growth and sexual development. It also creates a critical phase in the formation of identity. In this paper, the author shall identify the ways in which representation of adolescence in an American contemporary young adult novel, Anderson’s *Thirsty* (2008), reflects and shapes the maturation of its young protagonist. The author argues that the transformation of vampire in the novel works as a metaphor for the various changes and maturation process experienced by the protagonist in the novel. Furthermore, the author’s discussion will be preceded by a short history of vampire narrative. The author’s analysis is supported by psychological theories of adolescence and socio-cultural approach which focuses on the ambiguities of adolescents’ identity. Moreover, this paper alludes a psychoanalytic reading of the symbolism of the vampire which refers to Freud’s notions of libido and death drive. The conclusion of this paper is that Anderson’s *Thirsty* is a paranormal novel which positions the implied readers to understand the trials of an adolescent protagonist during his difficult time of transition from childhood to adulthood.

Keywords: vampirism, adolescent maturation, young adult literature

Introduction

The belief in vampires has existed since ancient time. Originally, the myth of the vampire can be found throughout history. In addition, the research concerning vampires has gone through many permutations. O’Quinn (2004) claims that in the history of literary monsters and vampires, society has sometimes maintained “macabre manipulation of humanhood” (p. 51).

Enright (2011) explains that “Vampires could be seen as mischievous spirits, [...] mindless creatures hungry for blood or other bodily secretions, sensual beings whose only drive was to sexually tutor the living, or powerful deities that demanded blood to prove the believer’s faith” (p. xi). Furthermore, Heldreth and Pharr (1999) states that vampires periodically appear from the darkness of humans’ imagination in folklore before they are popularized by other media. Moreover, vampirism has long been known as various identities in adult Western

texts, even during times in history when they were universally hated and feared. On account of this, vampirism in contemporary young adult texts is close to humans' identity.

Vampirism in a Contemporary Young Adult Text

In addition, Macdonald (2012) and Enright (2011) emphasize that vampires have extraordinary power over real living people. The nature and power of vampires in young adult (YA) text can be read in Anderson's *Thirsty* (2008). In the introduction part of this novel, the protagonist focalises that a vampire is like a human, but the vampire may have stronger power than humans:

IN THE SPRING, THERE ARE VAMPIRES IN THE WIND. People along by the side of country roads. People see them scuffling along by the side of the forests. They do not wear black, of course, but things they taken off bodies or bought on sale. ... The bodies begin turning up in Springfield, Lenox and Williamstown. ... One victim is barely buried. One is surrounded by swear words written in her own blood. We are warned that the vampires look like normal people, except when they are angry or when the bloodlust is upon them. One day in early April some people catch one just a few towns away, in Bradley. A policeman is wounded during the arrest, because a thirsty vampire has the strength of ten men. (Anderson, 2008, p. i)

Moreover, vampirism has frequently been linked to a raw sexuality which may bring universal issues such as the instinctual power of humans' libido. This instinctual power of sexual desire clearly appears in Anderson's *Thirsty*. This novel depicts the image of primal sexuality which relates to changes and puberty and causes tensions and stresses to a young male protagonist. The changes experienced by the protagonists occur because of hormonal growth which causes sexual drive (Anderson, 2008, p. 28). Accordingly, the intention of the young vampire is more likely to look for the explanation of his bodily changes and to understand his identity and new power in society.

In recent young adult literature, contemporary vampires have a little in common with the early folkloric ones (Day, 2006, p. 113). Besides, vampires likely tend to be different in every culture and periods because of various location and humans' anxiety factors (Bane, 2010). Moreover, since the 19th century the traditional or ethnic vampires have changed into modern vampires which enable them to interact in news ways with current human society (Melton, 2011). Thus, the author argues that the one who becomes a vampire in YA text feels anxiety because of his transformation identity from childhood to adult ways of being.

As an illustration, the experience of being a vampire in *Thirsty* is narrated from a perspective of a freshman of a high school, Christopher (less than 16 years old) who lives in Clayton, Massachusetts. This novel conveys the vampirism as an evil or disease instantaneously embedded in the human's heart which possibly enables its host immunity to it:

The celestial being looks at me with eyes invisible behind his dark designer glasses. He tells me, "You know what I am talking about. You know you are becoming a vampire. The vampires recognized it in you. Vampires can see other vampires. And you don't reflect when the blood-lust is upon you. You saw it in the lake".

"I don't know."

"Water doesn't lie". He still stares at me. "Your thirst is only beginning now. When you get angry, you become vampiric. And vice versa. When you get thirsty, you get angry without reason. Increasingly. You feel prone to violence. You feel prone to drink blood. In four months, you blood-thirst will have overwhelmed you. You won't be able to control yourself for long". (Anderson, 2008, p. 33)

Likewise, Schlozman (2000) states that “Vampires are usually characterized as purely evil, and they display their malevolence through their almost psychotic desire to satisfy their enormous hunger” (p. 50). Anderson’s *Thirsty* details Chris’ experience who lives in a town where vampires may grow and look for victims, but they are not acceptable at all by their society:

Vampires are lynched, traditionally. It is too costly to hold them for trial. A full-grown vampire is immortal if well fed, but can’t live long without human blood; and it is tricky to come by donors. There’s no need for a trial, I guess, because there’s not much doubt about vampires. There are, after all, the pointy teeth and the mirror problems. Whenever their blood-lust is upon them, their fangs slide down forward, and they have no reflection to speak of. And once people find those signs, it’s all over for the vampire. If you are a vampire and still alive, people know you must be guilty of murder. There’s no other alternative—no other way you could live. So sometimes they will burn you. Usually they will drive a stake through your heart. (Anderson, 2008, p. 9)

Since vampires are not accepted in Chris’ society, people celebrate a yearly ritual “Sad Festival of the vampire” to keep the evil “Vampire Lord” defeated and unable to enter their world. As a result, vampires are a scourge of society and they are hunted down and killed in the protagonist’s world.

Unlike the vampirism in common genre of vampire texts, vampirism in Anderson’s *Thirsty* tends not to expose many romantic moments such as kissing and encountering sexual contact. This does not mean that there is a space for the protagonist to think about the romantic imagination. However, Chris as a vampire is not as attractive and romantic as the male vampire portrayed in other contemporary similar genres. As a result, vampirism in Anderson’s *Thirsty* have its own special characteristic among various vampires texts.

In fact, Chris turns to be doubtful vampirism of a curse that seems threatening to destroy his future life:

“I can’t be a vampire. I’m not dead”.

“Vampirism is a lonely highway, and there are many routes that lead there”, he [celestial being] says. “Stop moving backward. Some vampires were cursed after died; some were born with the curse, passed on from their parents; some were cursed while still alive. You have the curse in you. I don’t know why. But puberty has set it off within you. Hormones. In a few months—four, I’d say, at the outside—you’re going to be fully vampiric”. (Anderson, 2008, p. 31)

However, Chris seems trapped in his anxiety of his bodily changes, dreams or fantasy of encountering sexual desire with a girl at his school, Jessica:

Briefly, I sleep. I dream of wielding great gouts of fire that wallop the vampires, as they cast their wicked spells. I dream of being cured by a kind touch from Chet. I dream that Rebecca Schwartz loves me and talk to her like I would talk no one else. I picture her careful, clever face, and I picture kissing it and and her smooth white neck. I kiss her right where the pulse is, and I can feel how her blood is. I can feel it moving through her like quick fire; I can sense it caressing her breasts from the inside, circling like electrons around her secret womb.

I can feel it in my mouth, running down my throat. I fell strong again; I feel alive; I feel the spark of her life twitching in my heart as she drains into me, from under me, as I feel spasms beneath me and her death. (Anderson, 2008, pp. 165-166)

The Adolescent Vampire and the Maturation Process

Anderson’s *Thirsty* shows the readers how a young vampire goes through the different range of conflicts, ambivalences, ambiguities to gain maturation and new understanding of his identity and place in society. An expert in psychology, J. Anderson (1980) constructs identity as a “dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (p. 159). Meanwhile, the word adolescence means “to grow to maturity” (Rice, 1999, p. 1).

Besides, many changes and challenges take place during this time of growth and maturation (Durham, 1998).

Moreover, adolescence is a transition time which is full of possibility, desire, and possibly changing the teens' identity. Furthermore, Blos (1968) insists that “Whoever has studied adolescence, regardless of theoretical background, has been aware of changes in the maturing personality that are generally identified with character formation” (p. 245). To emphasize, the vampirism among teenagers is strongly related with their growing up process and identity.

Additionally, the implied readers of Anderson's *Thirsty* are invited to sympathetically see the maturation process of the adolescent vampire in encountering different conflicts. Chris faces his main conflict when he appears to be turning into a vampire stage by stage; he is afraid to be known by his family, friends, and society. Chris indicates his own vampirism such as having “bad hunger” for a few months:

At night, I have been especially hungry. Sometimes I can't sleep well because I'm so hungry. Also, I have been feeling strange little percolations in my chest. Whatever it is, I don't like it. It's a desire for something, but I can't tell what. It makes me uncomfortable sometimes during the day. It has been disturbing my sleep occasionally at night. It is like a leaping or a squelching or an anguish about nothing at all. Maybe it's love, these percolations, that's what I think.

But maybe it's not love at all.

That night, after the lynching, after I am recognized by one of the damned, the hunger is very bad.

I lie with my head under the pillow. Everyone else is asleep. (Anderson, 2008, p. 13)

However, Chris seemingly hides his vampirism before he meets a celestial being called Chet whom he thinks could return himself to be full human. The narrative shows that the young protagonist does not want to join the vampire community in an abandoned church. He knows being a vampire will be not acceptable in his normal society because he lives in town where vampires are hunted and executed.

Moreover, his personal conflict becomes worse since the young protagonist describes himself as the one who lives in unharmonious family: Chris' parents sometimes fight with each other and they have decided to get a divorce as soon as Chris is in college:

A year and a half ago my mother and father informed us that as soon as we go away to college, they are getting a divorce. They are waiting.

After their big fight they avoided each other. My father worked late nights at the Station laboratory. My mother watched television or called her real-estate clients. Things were very bad for a year. Now, though, they are eating dinner at the same time and sleeping in the same room again, and they recognize each other by sight. They do not like to fight in front of Paul and me, ever since they overheard us referring to them as Ward and June. Now they go out to dinner alone once a month to fight. (Anderson, 2008, p. 6)

The identity of being a vampire which runs parallel with the life of young adult can be explained through scientific or supernatural reasons. In the case of Anderson's *Thirsty*, the issue of vampire identity is likely raised by having more scientific explanation rather than supernatural reasons. To illustrate, the young protagonist needs Chet, the celestial being, to explain what is happening to him as Chet focalises in adult voice:

I [Chris] look at him [Chet]. I am sort of wary, because I am not sure what happened.

“How they ganged up on you”, he says.

I shrug, and I say, “I started it”.

He nods, and his hair moves in the wind. He puts his hands in his pockets. “Did you? Did you start it? Who can say? You are going through a difficult age”, he says, “I'm sure. So many contrary emotions. Some of them very new and

violent. You won't be a boy for long. There are a lot of changes you're going through right now. Hormonal and so on". (Anderson, 2008, p. 28)

In line with this changes, Bradford, Strain, and Parson (2011) describes that adolescence “has rather limiting and negative connotations associated with ideas such as identity crisis, insecurity, sexual awakening, rebellion and adolescence as rites of passage” (p. 1).

Vampirism and Adolescent Identity

Anderson (1980) mentions some characteristics of identity such as identity achievements and identity diffusions. Identity achievements means “individuals who have experienced a decision-making period and are pursuing self-chosen occupation and ideological goals” and identity diffusions means “young people who have no set occupational or ideological direction, regardless of whether or not they may have experienced a decision-making period” (Anderson, 1980, p. 162).

Refers to Anderson's characteristics of identity, Anderson's *Thirsty* tends to depict its young protagonist with identity diffusion. Although Chris tends to make a decision in remaining to be human, he does not yet pursue clear self-chosen action for his future. He knows that he keeps feeling “thirsty”. Thus, in this situation the implied readers are positioned to fill the empty space of ideological goal for the protagonist as well the readers themselves.

It is interesting to discuss whether young adults can truly become real vampires. The existence of vampires as the real creatures in humans' real life is still a debate. Curran (2010) states that “Vampires are creatures from mythology and folklore ... While people really have been accused of drinking blood and being vampires, we do not know for sure whether vampires are real or not” (p. 6). Likewise, Macdonald (2012) claims that “Vampires do not exist—and they never have done. As living dead bodies, they contradict themselves. They are impossible” (p. 1).

The main thing which makes the vampires immortal in this world is the humans' anxiety. Beresford (2008) insists that fear is a key element to the vampire's existence (p. 1). Schlozman (2000) states that “Among adolescences [...] who have not successfully negotiated [the] trying developmental crisis, the displaced representation of adolescent challenges within the vampire mystique might be very wellknown account for the current popularity of the vampire's story” (p. 50). Hence, the vampirism in young adult texts can significantly work as the metaphor for adolescents' quest of transition in finding their identity and gaining maturation.

To repeat, the monstrous transformation of a teenage protagonist into a vampire in *Thirsty* is a metaphor of the pubescent body. In other words, the young adult fights his unruly body. He is unsuccessfully trying to suppress bodily powerful drives. Moreover, becoming a vampire means on the physical level entering zones of sexual impulse. According to Freudian view, the sexual impulse is supposed to “commence about the time of and in connection with the maturing process of puberty” (Freud, 2010, p. 12).

To illustrate, Chris in Anderson's *Thirsty* shows an increasing time and frequency of daydreaming and dreams on the female he is interested in. Chris' dreams and daydreaming of having sexual contact with Jessica seems to function as a wish fulfilling and satisfying the protagonist's desire that cannot be filled in reality. Although he has strong sexual fantasy or dreams, Chris finally refused an offer from another girl, Lolli, to act as a vampire—to suck her blood, encounter free sex and kill her:

“Lolli, I’m just having—”

“Shut up. Okay, look! You’re not like getting it through your thick head that people are killers, too—they kill to save themselves just like yours truly. Think of that? That’s what they do. That’s what we do. ...” She steps forward, her hand on my arm, and her chest grazes mine. Her face is so close. So hard. “So don’t waste my time, Chris. Let us all in on the secret. You gonna come out of the coffin? What’s going to be?”

“There must be—”

“Stop arguing!”

“I am not going to kill anyone!” I yelp. “Anyone I know! Forget it!”....

“I have a respect for human life and—”

I am used to having things happen to me, instead of me doing things. Now I realize that it is high time for me to do something quickly. Something escape-like. (Anderson, 2008, pp. 190-191)

Consequently, Anderson’s *Thirsty* positions the readers to see the struggle of the young protagonist to control her sexual drive as well as vampire’s desire. In line with this effort, Enright (2011) states that Anderson’s *Thirsty* takes the readers on the terminal journey of an average young man battling changes beyond his control (p. 77).

Furthermore, the maturation process in a YA text does not merely show the body changes accompanied by the sexual drive and the way to control it. In fact, maturation may be indicated by thought and additional verbal descriptive ability. At the same time, it is also based on the change of the way of thinking as experienced by the protagonist.

As an illustration in Anderson’s *Thirsty*, having a hard time of being vampire, Chris finally gains his mature thought and consciousness by realising what kind of change is happening to him. That is a change which cannot be cured by other, except by himself as written in dialogues between Chris and Chet:

“No, you’ve got to tell me. What about me now?” I try to sound strong. I’m histerycal. He can hear I’m afraid. He can hear I’m almost whimpering.

“What? Now?”

“My vampirism”.

“I’m so sorry”.

“You lied about that. You lied about being able to help me”.

He laughed kindly. “Of course I lied, Christoper”, he says. “What did I just say I am? I’m a freelance agent of the Forces of Darkness. I’m supposed to lie. I lie, cheat, kill, make people unhappy, and draw an enermous wage”.

“I helped you! I did everything you asked!”

“Christoper, Christoper, Christoper! It’s not within my power! I can’t change what you are. You are what you are. I could remold the matter you’re madde of to make you human, like a wizard turning a shepherdeness into a frog, but you wouldn’t be yourself. Everything about you is vampiric. Your jaws are vampire jaws. Your teeth are retractable vampire teeth. Your heart is a vampire heart with little wicked tendrils strapped around your ribs, strangling your other organs. Your mind—cold, distant, hungry—everything—you’re a vampire, Christoper”. (Anderson, 2008, p. 220)

However, Chris tries to think more clearly. As a young American, Chris does not believe that he is going to be a vampire as he focalises:

I want to be alive in twenty years to have a wife whose family I know well, ... This is what I due to me, because I am an American; and I can’t believe the thing I can feel squirming in my chest, that it is eating its way outward and that I am going to be a killer.

I know that it is there, my vampiric heart, squelching in the cavern of my ribs, spitting and sucking blood. (Anderson, 2008, p. 233)

In addition, Chris hardly tries to gain his adolescent maturation by making decision to love himself as well

as his family and to think about identity he wants to own for his future as he focalises:

I'm hiding behind my door. ... I don't want anyone to knock. I don't want them to knock. When they do, I'll be tracing their blue veins in my mind from their fist up their arms, up to their necks, their soft, pulpy necks.

And suddenly, I love them because they are so fragile, because I am no longer one of them. And because I love them, I should run into the night and do savage things I need to do.

No, I cannot do those things.

But I have to.

"I don't know—no, I do know. I can't do those things. And realise that decision to be human is not one single instant, but is a thousand choices made every day. It is choices we make every second and requires constant vigilance. We have to fight to remain human". ...

Hiding behind the doorway. Not that I would jump at someone who came in.

Not that I would jump.

I would never jump on a member of my family and drink their sweet, tart blood.

I would never. (Anderson, 2008, pp. 235-236)

The author believes that the major preparation for adulthood is the formation of identity. In fact, the young protagonist like Christ just starts to behave like adults. However, the maturation of physical sexuality and thought experienced by Chris does not yet guarantee that he is as mature as an adult. To illustrate, Chris finally plans to share his personal conflicts with his mother rather than overcoming it by himself:

As darkness grows thick around me and wraps itself on the furniture like black sheets hung in a house that will not be lived in again, I know that there is no hope and there is nothing for me to do.

Just tell my mother? Yes, yes, I think, because she will protect me in spite of everything. Mothers love their children, and she will protect me. It is only natural for mothers to love their children, it is natural thing that always happens in the wild. Even with animals. (Anderson, 2008, p. 234)

This conveys that Chris still needs parents to consult or share. As an adolescence who has a time of transition, Chris on one foot is still in childhood and another foot is tentatively testing the area of adulthood.

As the author has discussed above, a paranormal young adult text in the case of Anderson's *Thirsty* clearly portrays the adolescence transition. It speaks to adolescent readers from the young male protagonists' point of view. Likewise, the YA novel is focalised through consciousness of the young protagonist searching for his identity and exploring his relationship with adults and social forces.

Conclusions

Overall, the YA novel uses fantasy within realistic world to address various stages of adolescence maturation. The process of maturation in Anderson's *Thirsty* is parallel to the young male protagonist's transformation into a vampire. To emphasise, the text portrays the protagonist going through the stages of puberty in which the vampiric traits suddenly take place. Consequently, Anderson's *Thirsty* reveals archetypal adolescents engaged developmental crisis as well as maturation. In conclusion, Anderson's *Thirsty* is a YA paranormal novel which positions the implied readers to understand the trials of adolescence protagonist during his difficult time of transition from childhood to adulthood.

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