La mascolinità nella letteratura e nelle arti

Decostruzione/evoluzione di modelli identitari

A cura di
Mariaconcetta Costantini e Federica D'Ascenzo

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SOMMARIO

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"MIDDLE-AGED, ANTI-FEMALE SINGLE MEN" AND MIDDLE-AGED ROBUST FEMALE VAMPIRES IN E.F. BENSON'S "SPOOK TALES"

Ruth Heholt

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at three stories featuring "robust" female vampires by the Edwardian writer E.F. Benson. Benson's male characters are of a type, prevalent as an ideal in this era, to whom politeness (or at least an outward appearance of such) is paramount. Roughness, crudeness, violence against women, are all taboo. This chapter will examine the position that the "gentleman" is placed in through encounters with the egregious and barely controllable figure of the female vampire. It will argue that it is impossible for any gentleman to retain the expected manners, courtesy, calm, or control in the face of the truly monstrous feminine. The men in these tales are torn out of acceptable, controlled masculinity causing it to deconstruct. The veneer of politeness is no defence against female vampires and these Edwardian gentlemen are exposed as violent and ruthless, and in fact, not "polite" at all.

KEYWORDS: E.F. Benson; female vampires; gentlemen; middle-age; politeness.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Vengeful, horrid, predatory, utterly malignant"[1]. So says Jack Adrian of the ghosts in the "spook stories" of E.F. Benson. A contemporary and acquaintance of the famous ghost story writer M.R. James, Benson's ghost stories are acknowledged to be more outré than James's. Beastly, violent, and gory, they are, as Adrian says, "excellent"[2]. Both Benson's and James's

[1] Adrian 1988, 15.
[2] Adrian 1988, 15.

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Edwardian British ghost-seers tend to be single men of leisure or academically inclined. These are polite gentlemen, cultured, softly spoken, and well mannered. Benson himself was a gentleman. He was from a cultured upper-class family and his eminent father rose to be Bishop of Canterbury. Benson pursued manly occupations; he was a great ice-skater, an accomplished sportsman, a mountaineer, and an archaeologist working in the field. Yet among these stolid manly pursuits, Benson was surrounded by belief in the supernatural. His father co-founded The Ghost Club, his uncle Henry Sidgwick was a co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research and Benson believed he had seen a ghost in a garden in Rye in Sussex. For him the supernatural was personal. Stephen Carver notes,

> Benson's supernatural world is utterly contemporary: that of the inter-war gentleman of means and confirmed bachelor (like James, Benson was discreetly gay); with manservants, motorcars, summer leases, property envy, bridge, golf, brisk walks, and plenty of huntin', shootin', and fishin'. [3]

Benson writes his own type of masculinity. In *A Man's Place*, John Tosh notes that Benson was "a successful novelist, literary man about town and confirmed bachelor [...]. As a young man he mixed in the same circles as Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. In middle age he had a taste for the company of men half his age" [4]. Benson's mooted sexuality and his very manly pursuits and lifestyle meld together in his "spook stories". This chapter examines the transformation of this type of manly masculinity and how it deconstructs or evolves as it encounters the irrational, supernatural, and terrible. Many of Benson's "spook stories" are set in a homosocial world of leisured gentlemen where sexualised horrors creep in. Monsters in the shape of huge puckered hairless slugs and paedophilic female vampires face off the luckless men in his tales. What happens to manners and a sense of the 'polite gentleman' when a beast – ghost or monster – rears its head? How is this type of manly masculinity disrupted, deconstructed, or evolved as it encounters the truly appalling?

This chapter examines three short stories: "The Room in the Tower" (1912), "The Outcast" (1922), and "Mrs Amworth" (1923). In each of these tales, monsters come in the form of three female vampires. These vampire women are large, robust, and full of vitality. Mrs Acres in "The Outcast" is a "tall, finely built woman"; Mrs Amworth in the titular story is "big and energetic", and Mrs Stone's animated portrait in "The Room

[3] Carver n.d.

[4] Tosh 1999, 191-192.

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in the Tower" shows, "exuberance, and vitality"[5]. These are female creatures of excess – moving beyond femininity into the monstrous. Within Victorian/Edwardian British gendered orthodoxies and expectations, the position of the gentleman in relation to these creatures is varied, albeit that the destruction of the female vampire by men is always a given. This chapter will examine the position that the gentleman is placed in by the egregious and barely controllable figure of the female vampire. It will argue that it is impossible for any gentleman to retain manners, courtesy, calm, or control in the face of the truly monstrous feminine: the encounter with these creatures tears the men in these tales out of acceptable, controlled masculinity. Benson's robust, middle-aged, female vampires shake gender norms to the core. In her discussion of female vampires in the introduction to Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*, Greta Depledge argues that the vampire figure at the fin-de-siécle represents "fears that threatened the stability of gender ideologies concerning women"[6]. This chapter will turn this around to look at the threats to gender ideologies concerning men. Benson's vampires represent an uncanny doubling for the gentlemen who are their victims/hunters and in the final analysis, his female vampires are manifestations of the monstrous beast lurking within the shell of polite masculinity.

2. Staring, bad manners, and "looking back"

In "The Outcast", Charles Alington is visiting his brother-in-law, our narrator, Tony. Charles we hear:

> fears nothing, he hopes for nothing, he has no abhorrences or affections, for all physical and nervous functions are in him in the service of an intense inquisitiveness. He never passed a moral judgement in his life, he only wants to explore and to know. Knowledge, in fact, is his entire preoccupation.[7]

This is a classic gentleman of the Edwardian ghost or spook story. Knowledge, observation, *knowing* is everything. Yet what interests Charles is not the apparent material world around him, but "that world which lies about the confines of conscious existence"[8]: the unknown, the supernatural.

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[5] Benson 2012, 220, 329, 9. All references to Benson's work will be from the 2012 edition of *Night Terrors*.

[6] Depledge 2010, xiii.

[7] Benson 2012, 220-221.

[8] Benson 2012, 221.

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Just before Charles' visit, the little town was excited by the arrival of a certain Mrs Acres. The locals already knew that she had endured a tragedy when her young husband shot himself in front of her within a month of their marriage. Mrs Acres had gone abroad for a few months before moving to the Gatehouse in their town of Tarleton. This house was a site of terrible, historic tragedy where one brother denounced another in the days of the Elizabethan persecutions. That brother was "racked to death" [9], while the other "in a fit of remorse, hanged himself in the panelled parlour" [10]. This is the house that the handsome Mrs Acres comes to occupy.

Society in the small town is friendly and soon after her arrival Tony and his wife invite Mrs Acres to dinner. Good looking and charming though she is, our narrator says,

> for myself I was only conscious of some fundamental distaste of the handsome, clever woman who sat on my right [...]. She was charming to the eye, she was witty to the ear, she had grace and gracefulness, and all the time she was something terrible. But by degrees, as I found my own distaste increasing, I saw that my brother-in-law's interest was growing correspondingly keen. The "pretty lady" whose presence at dinner he had desired and obtained was enchaining him – not, so I began to guess, for her charm and her prettiness but for some purpose of study [...]. Certainly she had for him some fascination beyond that of the legitimate charm of a very handsome woman; he was studying her with intense curiosity. [11]

Handsome, charming, witty, graceful, she is "something terrible" and Charles is fascinated by her. Our narrator, Tony, believes that Charles is becoming enchained, and albeit that he decides that Charles is chained to Mrs Acres for the "purpose of study". Charles' fascination with Mrs Acres goes beyond "that of the legitimate" – it is edging into the taboo.

Mrs Acres is living in the Gatehouse and due to the terrible events said to have taken place there the house is purported to be haunted. We are told that "the late tenants of the house (which now had stood vacant for over three years) had quitted it after a month's occupation, in consequence, so it was commonly said, of unaccountable and horrible sights" [12]. At the dinner, in answer to a question Charles asks about if she is comfortable in her new home. Mrs Acres replies there is,

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[9] Benson 2012, 219.
[10] Benson 2012, 219.
[11] Benson 2012, 223-224.
[12] Benson 2012, 219.

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> "such a delightful atmosphere. I have never known a house that 'felt' so peaceful and homelike. Or is it merely fanciful to imagine that some houses have a sense of tranquillity about them and others are uneasy and even terrible?" Charles stared at her a moment in silence before he recollected his manners. [13]

Charles, for a moment, has completely lost his manners and lost himself to his emotions. This is a heart-stopping moment where Charles fails to be polite. For a gentleman of Charles' standing, to stare involuntarily indicates shock. In Victorian and Edwardian upper-class social mores, the truly manly man must be polite and civil to all regardless of someone's status in life. Indeed, early on, in the 1700s, Marc Hanvelt notes that the famous philosopher David Hume put the "notions of gentlemanliness and politeness" together [14]. The loss of politeness and the bodily shock Charles seems to be experiencing throw questions on his masculinity. Joanne Begiato in her discussion of manliness says, "Desirable standards of manliness required adult men to attain a high level of emotional and bodily management" [15]. Although fleeting, Mrs Acres has caused a pause in Charles' control over his body (he stares) and his emotions – he needs to gather himself back up to regain his manners.

Mrs Acres also has a visceral, bodily, effect on animals who exhibit extreme and uncontrollable terror when they see her. Dogs turn tail and flee and a cage of canaries "had manifested symptoms of extreme terror when Mrs Acres entered the room, beating themselves against the wires of their cage" [16]. Tony notes this and proposes a difference between man and beast:

> She inspired some sort of inexplicable fear, over which we, as trained and civilised human beings, had control, so that we behaved ourselves. But animals, without that check, gave way to it altogether. [17]

And yet, here are certainly questions about control and behaviour. Begiato argues that "While lack of self-control risked effeminacy [...] it was more often associated with being unmanly because it diminished the male body, making it beast-like or child-like" [18]. In the Edwardian gendered

13 Benson 2012, 224.
14 Hanvelt 2012, 60.
15 Begiato 2018, 48.
16 Benson 2012, 225.
17 Benson 2012, 225.
18 Begiato 2018, 61.

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schema of things, men would certainly be seen as more "civilised" than women. Therefore, if Charles as a "trained and civilised" gentleman gives way in the face of a female vampire, does this turn him more beastly? If the vampire is a beast, the uncontrolled male body is beast-like.

Our next robust female vampire, in the titular story "Mrs Amworth", lives in the quintessentially English village of Maxley where, "In all England you could not find a sweeter and a saner situation" [19]. Mrs Amworth is a new arrival in the village. She had been living in India until her husband died and now has come back to her ancestral home of Maxley. To begin with, like Mrs Acres, Mrs Amworth is a welcome addition to their small society:

> Big and energetic, her vigorous and genial personality speedily woke Maxley up to a higher degree of sociality than it had ever known before. Most of us were bachelors or spinsters or elderly folk not much inclined to exert ourselves [...] and hitherto the gaiety of a small tea-party, with bridge afterwards and goloshes (when it was wet) to trip home in for a solitary dinner, was about the climax of our festivities. But Mrs Amworth showed us more gregarious way, and set an example of luncheon-parties and little dinners, which we began to follow. [20]

"Big", "energetic", "vigorous", and "gregarious", Mrs Amworth wakes Maxley up. There is a deliberate suggestion of de- or a-sexualization in the description of the population, "bachelors", "spinsters", "elderly folk". In her chapter "The Hypersexualization of the Female Vampire", Amada Hobson usefully argues the following:

> The vampire is a hypersexualized image that blends that violence and seduction with fears of the destructive beauty and charm of womanhood. In this manner [...] ideas about the female body and womanhood amplify the fears surrounding female vampires and their sexuality. Beliefs about womanhood centre on a notion of idealized feminine weakness and passivity and one specific type of weakness: the purported moral weakness manifested through the voracious and destructive nature of female sexuality. The female vampire with her heightened physical strength and her longevity move her firmly into the uncontrollable category. [21]

Mrs Amworth is certainly not weak and her sexuality is suggested in many ways. We are told that she plays the piano "in a free and exuberant

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19 Benson 2012, 327.
20 Benson 2012, 329.
21 Hobson 2016, 12.

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manner", has turned her garden "into a glowing patch of luxuriant blossoming" [22] and of course is sucking the blood of the locals.

Our narrator has a friend and neighbour Francis Urcombe, a Professor of Physiology at Cambridge now retired to Maxley and devoting himself "to the study of those occult and curious phenomena which seem equally to concern the physical and the psychical sides of human nature" [23]: the "misty and perilous places" [24]. Urcombe, when he meets her, acknowledges "that he was vastly interested in her [...] and one could see him watching and scrutinising her" [25]. In fact, Urcombe *stares* at Mrs Amworth. When she comes round and plays cards, Urcombe "would watch her with the air of a man who has some deep problem in front of him", and he "would enjoy an hour spent thus" [26]. In any kind of social situation, a man staring at a woman for an hour or more cannot possibly be deemed polite or acceptable: convention, expectation, and politeness have been discarded.

In terms of masculinity the "white, male gaze" has of course been the subject of many debates, particularly around colonialism. Richard Dyer, in 1997, contended that, "the ultimate position of power in a society that controls people through their visibility is that of invisibility, the *watcher*" [27]. Men can look, but they are not supposed to be *looked at*. From this point of view, Urcombe's scrutiny of Mrs Amworth is perhaps par for the course. However, this is a lady in a private house and in this case, there is extreme discourtesy. Further, in such a situation such very close observation is likely to have a sexual element to it. And where Mrs Amworth goes (as well as Mrs Acres), sex will rear its head. Both are described as good looking and Mrs Acres is said to have a "beautiful Jewish profile", with "the high forehead, the very full-lipped mouth, the bridged nose", "which all suggested rather than exemplified an Eastern origin" [28]. Marie Mulvey-Roberts in *Dangerous Bodies* is among the scholars who argue that the figure of the Jew and the vampire have historically been linked through anti-Semitic discourse and she also points to a link between the vampire and the figure of Judas [29]. In Benson's tales, in the scrutiny both

[22] Benson 2012, 329.
[23] Benson 2012, 328.
[24] Benson 2012, 327.
[25] Benson 2012, 329.
[26] Benson 2012, 330.
[27] Dyer 1997, 44.
[28] Benson 2012, 223.
[29] Mulvey-Roberts 2016, 133. Also see the point made later in this chapter about Mrs Acres perhaps being a reincarnation of Judas Iscariot.

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women are subjected to there are hints of a colonial male gaze – bearing in mind Mrs Amworth has recently returned from India and Mrs Acres if not fully Jewish seems to suggest it. However, they are not colonial subjects, they are well to do, handsome society women, due within that community, to a level of courtesy, and chivalry that is entirely absent. And although it turns out that they are indeed monstrous, our gentlemen look too far: beyond the realms of politeness and into downright rudeness. And yet, our narrator notes, "if Urcombe was observing her, she on her side was observing him with fixed eye and parted mouth" [30]. Benson's vampires are not passive, and while they may be observed, it is not all one way: these female vampires also *see* the men.

3. Coming too close

Nick Groom in his ground-breaking study *The Vampire: A New History*, says, "Our encounter with them is impossibly intimate because they become us – or we become them" [31]. This intimacy and the doubling and melding of vampire and victim or hunter is played out in all of Benson's vampire tales. In "Mrs Amworth", one night the narrator has a terrible dream. He usually sleeps with his windows open, but "Half-suffocating I dreamed that I spang out of bed, and went across to open them [when] I saw, the indescribable horror of incipient nightmare, Mrs Amworth's face suspended close to the pane in the darkness outside, nodding and smiling at me" [32]. He rushes to another window but "whichever window I opened Mrs Amworth's face would float in" [33]. This is a lady trying to gain entrance to his bedroom, her face bobbing about where it has no business to be: "she was fluttering outside, like some terrible bat, trying to gain admittance" [34]. The intimacy of a female vampire entering our gentleman's dreams is itself appalling. Not only is there penetration into the most intimate nooks of his psyche (and his bedroom) but there is also a complete lack of control on his part. She is looking in at him: his sleeping form is the subject/object of her gaze: and she is at the same time *inside* him.

30 Benson 2012, 331.
31 Groom 2018, 206.
32 Benson 2012, 333.
33 Benson 2012, 333-334.
34 Benson 2012, 335.

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The dream of a vampire, whereby that vampire invades the vulnerable, passive psyche of a male, is the entire premise for the horrifying tale "The Room in the Tower". In this story the vampire, Julia Stone, invades the narrator's dreams for decades. He has a recurring dream that he arrives at a house where tea is being taken on the lawn. He half recognises a boy, Jack Stone, whom he knew at school but the rest of the family party are unknown to him. They sit in absolute silence until Mrs Stone says,

> "Jack will show you your room: I have given you the room in the tower". Quite inexplicably my heart sank at her words. I felt as if I had known that I should have the room in the tower, and that it contained something dreadful and significant. Jack instantly got up, and I understood that I had to follow him. In silence we passed through the hall, and mounted a great oak staircase with many corners, and arrived at a small landing with two doors set in it. He pushed one of these doors open for me to enter, and without coming in himself, closed it after me. Then I knew that my conjecture had been right: there was something awful in the room, and with the terror of nightmare growing swifty and enveloping me, I awoke in a spasm of terror. [35]

This dream recurs to him for fifteen years. In this world of dreams and sleep the narrator has no volition. He must go up to the room in the tower. As the years pass and the dreams continue, the narrator gets to know more of the house and the inhabitants change over the years. After some time he dreams again, but Mrs Stone is not there and the party are dressed in black. He guesses she is dead and "my heart leaped at the thought that perhaps this time I should not have to sleep in the room in the tower" [36].

> Suddenly a voice which I knew well broke the stillness, the voice of Mrs Stone, saying, 'Jack will show you to your room: I have given you the room in the tower'. It seemed to come from near the gate in the red-brick wall that bounded the lawn, and looking up, I saw that the grass outside was sown thick with gravestones. A curious greyish light shone from them, and I could read the lettering on the grave nearest me, and it was, 'In evil memory of Julia Stone'. And as usual Jack got up, and again I followed him through the hall and up the staircase with many corners. On this occasion it was darker than usual, and when I passed into the room in the tower [...] there was a dreadful odour of decay in the room, and I woke up screaming. [37]

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35 Benson 2012, 4-5.
36 Benson 2012, 6.
37 Benson 2012, 6.

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Ostensibly, the scene at the start is a polite scenario of a well-to-do family taking tea. Our narrator has no choice but to go up to the room in the tower. Politeness demands this, but also as it is a dream, there is no alternative and our narrator has no control.

In two famous tales female vampires appear in dreams. In Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, the beautiful, young Carmilla comes to our heroine in a dream and in *Dracula* the brides also come to Jonathan Harker in what he assumes is a dream [38]. These vampire women are explicitly sexualized and they are young and beautiful. Hobson says the female vampires in *Carmilla* and *Dracula* are hypersexualised vampires who represent "the titillation of the sexually voracious, beautiful, but deadly seductresses" [39]. These vampires ride the waves of erotic dreams while Benson's vampires bob about the window or horrify with grey hair and an odour of decay. Dreams of vampires for Benson's men form an intrusion and a violation that evoke a much more monstrous sexuality than that in *Carmilla* or *Dracula*.

The very signature of vampiric existence involves a violation and a penetrative intrusion: vampires suck blood. Groom says:

> Women [...] lost blood through menstruation, and their blood was in any case thought to be thinner than men's. All this associated women with vampirism, and the vampires themselves increasingly shifted from the ruddy and replete beings of Eastern European cases to the pale and cadaverous features of corpse-like *femme fatales*. [40]

Benson's female vampires perhaps hark back to the earlier "ruddy" vampires. Mrs Amworth for example has a "vital, voluminous presence" [41]. This is no pale, slender, graceful being. Also, although still attractive, she is older:

> In matter of age, she frankly volunteered the information that she was forty-five; but her briskness, her activity, her unravaged skin, her coal-black hair, made it difficult to believe that she was not adopting an unusual device, and adding ten years on to her age instead of subtracting them. [42]

Mrs Amworth is firmly in middle-age. Mrs Acres too is not young, although apparently "still on the sunny slope that leads up to the tableland

38 Le Fanu 1872 and Stoker 2014.
39 Hobson 2016, 10.
40 Groom 2018, 149.
41 Benson 2012, 331.
42 Benson 2012, 339.

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of life which begins at forty years"[43]. Sian Macfie says that "At the close of the nineteenth century, notions of the close connection between the female and the vampiric were largely based upon a sense of women's association with blood"[44]. These robust, older female vampires though, represent a monstrous femininity which has a different relationship to blood than the apparently younger vampires in Le Fanu's and Stoker's tales. And, in the natural course of things (if they weren't vampires!) Mrs Acres would still be menstruating, but Mrs Amworth might at least be approaching peri-menopause while Julia Stone, older than both the others would have passed the menopause some time ago. These are mature women, not fey and waif-like "girls"[45].

In "The Room in the Tower", Julia Stone's age and appearance are part of her horror. Eventually and inevitably, by seeming mere chance, the narrator finds himself actually in the room in the tower many years after first dreaming of it. There is a portrait in his room:

> It represented Mrs Stone as I had last seen her in my dreams: old and withered and white-haired. But in spite of the evident feebleness of body, a dreadful exuberance and vitality shone through the envelope of flesh, an exuberance wholly malign, a vitality that foamed and frothed with unimaginable evil. [46]

Somehow, in this description it is the misplaced and unnatural "vitality" and the "dreadful exuberance" that is more horrifying than the fact that she is "old and withered". Our narrator cannot stand the picture being in his room and as they remove it, "The extraordinary weight of the picture had struck me [and] I caught sight of my own hand. There was blood on it, in considerable quantities"[47]. There is however no wound. He goes to bed, not scared now the portrait is outside his room. During the night there is a storm and:

> My waking was [...] instantaneous [...]. I knew exactly where I was, in the room which I had dreaded in dreams, but no horror that I ever felt when asleep approached the fear that now invaded and froze my brain. [...] Something I knew was in the room with me [...] a figure that leaned over the end

[43] Benson 2012, 218.

[44] Sian Macfie 1991, 60.

[45] It is worth also pointing to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Good Lady Ducayne who has "a withered countenance [and] a face that should have been hidden under a coffin-lid years and years ago". Lady Ducayne is not robust however, and she obtains her blood via medical transfusion (Braddon 1897).

[46] Benson 2012, 9.

[47] Benson 2012, 10.

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> of my bed, watching me. It was dressed in some close-clinging white garment, spotted and stained with mold, and the face was that of the portrait.
> I heard the rustle of moment coming nearer me, and, more horrible yet, perceived an odour of corruption and decay. And then a hand was laid on the side of my neck, and close beside my ear I heard quick-taken, eager breathing. [...] Then a voice, already familiar to me, spoke.
> "I knew you would come to the room in the tower", it said. "I have been waiting long for you. At last you have come. Tonight I shall feast; before long we will feast together". [48]

The vampire is in his room, leaning over his bed ready to feast on him as he lies paralysed with fear. Julia Stone has her hand on his neck and is eager and panting in his ear. She is there to penetrate his private spaces and places: the creature is powerful, stinking, and corrupt and it is ready to lean down and feast on him.

In "The Room in the Tower" as Julia Stone approaches the narrator so closely that he can feel her breath on his neck, he says, "I hit wildly with both arms, kicking out at the same moment, and heard a little animal-squeal, and something soft dropped with a thud beside me" [49]. This time the narrator hits out and back and Julia Stone is not so strong after all. Hobson argues, "The female vampire, [...] is the perfect metaphor for that unstoppable [sexual] force, draining her victims of vitality – their blood and sexual energy" [50]. She says there are, "symbolic connections of blood and female sexuality" [51]. "The Room in the Tower", at the end, drips in blood. After she is banished Julia Stone's "coffin was found in the course of a few days again protruding from the ground [and] the coffin was found to be full of blood" [52].

For the other female vampires there are even more violent ends that also finish in an almost literal blood bath. When Mrs Amworth rises from the dead once too often and is spotted returning to her grave, the narrator and the scientifically scrutinising Frances Urcombe open her coffin: "we looked on the face of Mrs Amworth. The eyes, once closed in death, were open, the cheeks were flushed with colour, the red, full-lipped mouth seemed to smile" [53]. Mrs Amworth is looking back at them. Urcombe takes a pick and

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48 Benson 2012, 12.
49 Benson 2012, 12-13.
50 Hobson 2016, 10.
51 Hobson 2016, 9.
52 Benson 2012, 14.
53 Benson 2012, 339.

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> laying the point of it on her left breast, measured his distance [...]. He grasped the pick in both hands, raised it an inch or two for the taking of his aim, and then with full force brought it down on her breast. A fountain of blood, though she had been dead so long spouted high in the air, falling with the thud of a heavy splash over the shroud, and simultaneously from those red lips came one long, appalling cry [...]. With that, instantaneous a lightning flash, came the touch of corruption on her face, the colour of it faded to ash, the plump cheeks fell in, the mouth dropped. [54]

As Julia Stone's coffin swims in blood so Mrs Amworth has too much in her. And, like both the others, Mrs Acres will just not stay buried; the sea rejects her "the kindly earth will not receive her" [55] and they have to cremate her to keep her quiet.

4. Conclusion

Benson's robust, vigorous, and generally large older female vampires violate the men they encounter. They echo the "intimacy" suggested by Groom and there is, for them all, a level of recognition with their victim/hunters that is reminiscent of a sort of doubling. David Stuart Davies in the introduction to *Night Terrors* says, "With the preponderance of middle-aged, anti-female, single men taking the role of narrator in so many of Benson's narratives, it is no surprise, then, that women rarely feature as the central characters [...] and when they do their role is both sinister and ominous" [56]. This accusation of misogyny is extended by Jack Adrian who says that "the evidence is that, as a breed, he actively detested them [women]" [57]. We might of course look aslant at this proclamation and wonder who in fact detests this "breed" but, this aside, Adrian continues:

> It's significant that when you do come across a "good" female character she exhibits many of the attributes society then deemed desirable in the perfect male. In effect [...] Fred's good heroines are men in drag.
> In the ghost stories the position is even more clear-cut; [...] his women are thoroughly hateful.
> If they are not simply shrews and harpies who drive good men to an early grave, or worse, then they are real vampires, soul-suckers, predators, witches. [58]

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54 Benson 2012, 339-340.
55 Benson 2012, 229.
56 Davies 2012, x.
57 Adrian 1990, 16.
58 Adrian 1990, 16.

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In "The Outcast", talking about reincarnation, Urcombe says "sex doesn't matter; souls [...] are sexless"[59]. Yet is this true? Or does "sexless" merely mean "male"? If we follow Adrian's idea of "men in drag" and if Benson is merely writing men-for-men then where are the women and who in fact is in "drag"?

So what does this mean for our manly, masculine, Edwardian gentlemen? The men who encounter the vampire women often experience a cascade of emotion that is inescapable: emotions invade their bodies. Begiato argues that Victorians believed that "the manly character was sustained [...] by controlling inappropriate passions and feelings such as anger and fear"[60]. In the oft mooted mind/body split, when encountering female vampires, the men's emotions smash the two together. Control is lost and reason and objectivity disappear in the face of strong emotion.

Gina Wisker contends that "vampire women were clearly a threat to everything British, male, imperial, conventional, traditional, safe"[61]. It is not surprising then that our female vampires need to be annihilated. There is extreme violence at the end of each tale, and in two cases men turn to murder. There is a confusion in masculinity for our victims/hunters; a crisis brought about by their encounters with these middle-aged female vampires. From an uncontrolled hypermasculinity evidenced by "staring" rather than observing, and by a final recourse to violence rather than reason, the men confronting these female vampires are forced into a kind of über-masculinity. The rhetoric is that they are killing a beast, but perhaps Benson's vampire-killing men are attempting to erase the "beast within" – unregulated and uncontrolled masculinity.

I began this chapter by arguing for some level of autobiography in Benson's work. Carver goes further and states; "Benson's jaunty narrators, who are often writers clearly based on himself"[62]. But if this is so, where is the beast and where is the gentleman? In the stories examined there is a "recognition" and a penetrative awareness between man and vampire. Are Benson's beastly female vampires a doubling of the male? A manifestation of the worst of masculinity? Adrian suggests that Mrs Acres is a reincarnation of Judas Iscariot, the "very worst being that ever lived" (bearing in mind that Judas Iscariot was male), and says outright

59 Benson 2012, 222.
60 Begiato 2018, 49.
61 Wisker 2016, 153.
62 Carver n.d.

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that Benson's "women are thoroughly hateful"[63]. Yet if we follow the contention that Benson's women are "men in drag" this leaves his gentlemen in a thoroughly compromised position. Brooke Cameron, Suyin Olguin and Ian M. Clark argue that "By putting humans back into the food chain, vampires encourage us to meditate on our own repressed and ravenous appetites; our own desires flow back to us through the vampire's bite. Subject and object mix together like the very fluids within the vampire's mouth, dissolving divisions and difference"[64]. And in this case, it might be Benson's anti-femininity that causes the bestial evolution of the gentleman. If the female is erased in these tales of middle-aged vampires – what is left but "Middle-aged, anti-Female single men"[65]?

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63 Adrian 1988, 6.
64 Cameron - Olguin - Clark 2023, 13.
65 Davies 2012, x.

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