

When Matter Teaches: Decentering the Human Teacher and Rethinking Pedagogy through Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*

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ABSTRACT: *As per conventional thought, education is a process guided by humans. Learning occurs when the teacher explains and students listen. And often the material world, such as objects, spaces, and environments, is treated as passive and secondary. However, a recent theoretical work in new materialism challenges this assumption by stating that matter is not passive, but active and capable of shaping human experiences. Through Bennett's theory of Vibrant Matter, this paper analyses how nonhuman elements engage in the learning process in Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire. Present research on Rice majorly focuses on aspects of psychology, ethics and identity. Less attention has been given to the role played by material environments in shaping the character transformation. This study adopts a close textual analysis supported by the new materialist theory of Bennett to analyse how hunger, darkness, confinement and urban setting act as pedagogical forces. The paper puts forth the concept of material pedagogy wherein learning takes place through human-nonhuman interaction. The findings hint that present classrooms too are moulded by material environments that silently impact thinking patterns and interactions.*

Key Words: *material pedagogy; new materialism; vibrant matter; vampire fiction; learning environments*

Introduction

Education is often perceived as a human-centred activity. It is often presumed that knowledge is transferred from teacher to student through explanation. As a result, classrooms are perceived as neutral spaces where learning simply happens between teacher and student. But are environments really inert? Or do they engage in shaping the learning? In her work *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett compels us to rethink the status of matter. Bennett argues that what we believe to be 'dead' or 'inactive' matter in reality possesses vitality and it has strong effects (Bennett xvi). According to this view, learning cannot be understood only through human interactions. Instead, it should be comprehended as a process forming through a network of bodies, objects and spaces.

Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* gives an engaging literary base to explore this idea. Even though the novel is often read for its psychological and moral aspects and dilemmas, it also reveals a crucial role played by the environment in shaping characters' experiences. Louis is not formally educated. However, he is persistently learning through hunger, fear, darkness, memory and environmental limitations. This paper argues that learning happens through encounters and interactions with nonhuman forces. It gives a form of material pedagogy by decentering the human teacher.

Literature Review

Researchers have often noted that Anne Rice brought an evolution in the way vampires are perceived in modern fiction. Instead of portraying the vampires as the epitome of evil, she presents the readers with Louis, a figure who contemplates, doubts and questions himself. Rice's vampire is "sympathetic", because Louis is preoccupied with morality and he often contemplates over the purpose of his existence rather than living a life of cruelty, as is the basic vampiric nature (Sarhan and Abdul Sahib 36). From their perspective, vampirism in the novel is less centred on horror and more occupied with inner conflicts. It begins to feel like a state of existence rather than just a representation of monstrous identity.

Similarly, Khadim and Fejer observe that Rice reshapes the long-established vampire narrative by associating it with the concerns about identity and cultural change (2). They argue that the novel reflects anxieties about belongingness and a search for self in this ever-changing world. This helps us to understand why Louis often feels disconnected. He stands stuck between his human soul and vampiric body, between an urge to act morally and being compelled to kill. Louis's character is liminal.

Other critics view the novel from different angles. For instance, Candace Benefiel argues that Rice reworks familiar social structures, especially the idea of family (193). Louis, Lestat and Claudia's bond is not

a normal family relationship. Their bond is very complicated and emotionally wavering. Similarly, George Haggerty proposes that Rice challenges traditional ideas of desire and intimacy by offering divergent ways of understanding relationships (66). Collectively, these critics depict how the novel questions accepted societal and cultural norms and frameworks.

Yet, despite being valuable work, the research remains limited to, and majorly focuses on human concerns such as identity, desire, mortality and culture. Role of the material world in shaping the characters' transformation has received less attention. Hunger, darkness, confinement and urban space are often treated as atmosphere rather than as active forces. Bennett's work comes as essential and helpful here. According to her, matter is not passive. It has the capacity to influence events and outcomes (Bennett xvi). She suggests that humans alone do not incite any actions. She explains this through the idea of distributed agency wherein she argues that the actions emerge from networks of interactions, both human and nonhuman. When applied to Rice's novel, it reveals how blood disciplines the body, how darkness reshapes the time and how spaces condition reflection. In this light, Louis's transformation transcends the psychological domains, getting shaped by his relationships and surroundings. This research is not limited to what Louis thinks; rather, it analyses how the world and matter around him influence him.

Methodology

This study is interpretive in nature with a close reading of the text. The researcher has examined passages from *Interview with the Vampire* through Bennett's theory as a lens to understand how nonhuman elements influence human thought process and behaviour. Objects and environments are not treated as mere background details. The present study pays attention to moments when matter shapes Louis's decision and his understanding of himself. The aim of this study is not to replace human interpretation but to expand it by seeing learning as something produced through human and nonhuman interactions.

Material Forces as Teachers

If understood through Bennett's argument in *Vibrant Matter*, then matter is not passive. According to her, things have their own 'vitality'; they can affect and even shape human actions (Bennett xvi). However, it shouldn't be misinterpreted as these objects having human-like cognitive abilities. They exercise certain pressure, guide the action and shape results. For Bennett, agency is divided across assemblages (a network of humans and nonhumans working together) (Bennett 23).

When the novel *Interview with the Vampire* is read while keeping Bennett's theory in focus, it becomes evident that Louis is not influenced and guided by Lestat alone. His actions are shaped by hunger, darkness, coffin, cities and even memory. These forces direct his reaction even before he is consciously aware of them. Learning doesn't begin with explanations here; rather, it begins with and is shaped by experiences and encounters. Louis learns through his experience with material conditions. His body responds to the situation even before his mind can begin to understand and his environment restricts him even before he protests. This states that matter has "thing-power", an ability to bring difference in events (Bennett 6). Louis doesn't go through a transformation because of the knowledge delivered by any teacher. His transformation is the result of his being entangled in forces that shape him.

In modern classrooms, it is often perceived that teaching happens through explanation and instruction given by teachers. However, it should be noted that students are also influenced and shaped by the temperature of the classroom, structure of seating arrangements, effectiveness of the lighting, digital screens, noise and architecture. These things influence the mood, focus, anxiety and even participation of the learners.

Blood and the Education of the Body

In the novel *Interview with the Vampire*, blood is often taken as symbolic. But if looked from Bennett's theoretical perspective, then blood also holds material significance. It incites hunger, disciplines the body and reorganises perception. For instance, after turning into a vampire, Louis realised that something in him had changed fundamentally. Louis begins to understand his new condition through his appetite for blood. Louis describes his bodily transformation in vivid detail:

All my human fluids were being forced out of me. I was dying as a human, yet completely alive as a vampire; and with my awakened senses, I had to preside over the death of my body with discomfort and fear. (Rice 13)

Bennett argues that matter has the capacity to “impede or block the will and designs of humans” (viii). Blood does exactly this to Louis. Even though Louis may not wish to kill, even though he may resist the urge to kill, his hunger for blood persists and his body compels him to act. Louis is not given moral instructions about whether to kill humans or survive on animal blood. His moral education unfolds through the conflict between desire and restraint. In trying to survive on human blood, Louis is attempting to preserve his humanly ethics. But his body resists this attempt of Louis as the hunger for blood doesn’t satiate. The material force of blood makes Louis realise what he has become now. Blood shapes his understanding of himself through sensation and not language.

In education, it is often neglected that the students are not just minds, but they are physical beings too. Elements such as hunger, fatigue, physical discomfort and emotional stress can significantly affect their learning. A hungry student cannot focus, no matter how interesting the teacher’s teaching strategy is. Material pedagogy reminds us that the body learns even before the intellect does. Aspects such as physical well-being, classroom comfort and lived experiences matter a lot. When Louis hungers for blood, it is his body forcing him to feel and act differently. He doesn’t ‘think’ his way into becoming a vampire. In the same way, if a classroom is too hot and the students feel sleepy, it is their body reacting. Hence, teaching is not only cognitive. It is sensory and bodily. When the educators understand this, they can design learning environments that are more humane.

Darkness and a New Sense of Time

Darkness is central to a vampire’s life. It shapes their life. It decides a vampire’s movement, when he should hide, when he is most powerful and when he is vulnerable. Gradually, Louis begins to experience time differently. For him, night no longer symbolises the absence of day; rather, it becomes his natural world order because he cannot survive the sunlight. He begins to see life as a never-ending phenomenon. Darkness is not merely the background in this novel. It shapes the narrative. It changes how Louis thinks and feels. According to Bennett, agency is not limited to humans alone; rather, it derives from relationships between varying forces (Bennett 23). Darkness and Louis form a relationship with each other- an assemblage in Bennett’s terms. The absence of light alters his schedule and also his sense of meaning. Darkness becomes a quiet but powerful teacher that teaches him patience and slows him down. For Bennett, things like electricity, metal and food are vibrant matter and all these matters influence and shape human behaviour (x). In Rice’s novel, when viewed from this perspective, darkness begins to perform a similar role. It gives direction as well as consequences to Louis’s actions. For instance, in the novel, Louis reflects on how the night changes not only what he sees, but also how he understands his place in the world:

I wanted those waters to be blue. And they were not. They were the nighttime waters, and how I suffered then, straining to remember the seas that a young man’s untutored senses had taken for granted, that an undisciplined memory had let slip away for eternity. The Mediterranean was black, black off the coast of Italy, black off the coast of Greece, black always, black when, in the small cold hours before dawn... I lowered a lantern down... and nothing came to light on that heaving surface but the light itself... which seemed to fix on me from the depths and say, “Louis, your quest is for darkness only. This sea is not your sea. The myths of men are not your myths. Men’s treasures are not yours.” (Rice 100)

Similarly, from a pedagogical perspective, time shapes learning. The length of lectures, exam schedules, deadlines and academic calendars influence students’ manner and pace of processing the information. For instance, if the system is fast-paced, it is very likely that the students will develop very shallow learning. It is worth asking whether students are allowed space for reflection or are they being rushed towards content completion. Material pedagogy motivates educators to reflect upon temporality as a force in learning. Time itself teaches students. The way time is arranged significantly impacts students’ depth of learning, determines their stress level, and ensures or weakens retention and engagement.

Confinement, Stillness, and Reflection

The coffin is an important and powerful matter in the novel. It acts as a bed for Louis. However, one with restricted movements. Louis must enter the coffin every day. However, the limited space in the coffin compels him to stillness. Despite being a shelter, it’s a less reliable one. At the same time, if someone opens the coffin, he cannot protect himself right away. Coffin creates a sense of dependence. It makes him vulnerable. Bennett argues that nonhuman objects’ ability to influence and shape the actions and behaviours

of humans is often underestimated (3). The coffin shapes Louis's thought process. It forces Louis to reflect his actions and it becomes impossible to escape stillness. The following paragraph evinces this argument:

And I shut the coffin that morning with a kind of despair. I should explain now, though, that the shutting of the coffin is always disturbing. It is rather like going under a modern anesthetic on an operating table. Even a casual mistake on the part of an intruder might mean death. ... With thoughts of the dead woman and child still in my brain, and the sun rising, I had no energy left to argue with him, and lay down to miserable dreams. (Rice 47)

Being enclosed in the coffin is not only negative. Within that confinement, Louis unavoidably faces his memories and guilt. Here, his thoughts deepen. Here it is evident how the coffin has the capacity to alter the course of events as claimed by Bennett (viii).

Similarly, in present classrooms, space can also influence the behaviour of students. The arrangement of desks in the form of rows develops silence and hierarchy with students sitting at the front possibly considering themselves as more special than the ones at the back. If the classroom seating arrangement is shifted to a circular seating formation, then it encourages a meaningful dialogue between teachers and students. A quiet environment can encourage concentration. Just as the coffin forces Louis to reflect, similarly, an intentionally developed quiet environment can encourage thoughtful reflection and interaction. Hence, material pedagogy reminds us that the spatial designs are not neutral. Instead, they play an active role in shaping the intellectual life of learners.

The City as a Living Classroom

In the novel *Interview with the Vampire*, cities like New Orleans and Paris act as assemblages that shape Louis's experiences through sensation and history. Urban life brings spectacle and suffering. When Louis's urge to feed goes out of control, he feeds on a five-year-old Claudia and ultimately she is converted into a vampire, confining her soul permanently into a body of a child. Paris leads Louis to others of his kind during his quest to find answers to his vampiric life. But this very city turns his life up-side down, snatching away everything he held dear. The city didn't simply house Louis- it shaped him into who he became. From Bennett's framework, the city is like an assemblage of bodies, architecture, history and motion. It forces him to observe humanity closely. It teaches him through contact- contact with other of his own kind.

In present times, learning is not confined to the classrooms. Schools are a part of larger cultural assemblages. Students' identities are shaped by the digital world, urban spaces and social contexts. If the city teaches Louis through immersion, the present generation is constantly being taught by social media platforms, public spaces and advancing technology. Education and these forces are inseparable. Material pedagogy encourages educators to acknowledge that learning extends beyond classroom walls. The environment is always part of the lesson.

Implications for Education

Learning doesn't happen solely through teachers. Bodies, matter and environment are equally responsible. If matter shapes Louis's transformation, then classroom materials and environment also affect students' learning. Firstly, as educators, it is essential to understand that students are physical beings. Hunger, fatigue, comfort, and emotions affect attention and comprehension. It is essential to consider the body and not just the mind. Secondly, time matters a lot. It is essential to keep in check the pace of lessons and deadlines. They influence the learning of students. Knowledge given in a rush can limit the grasping power and ability to reflect. Thirdly, space impacts cognitive functioning. Classroom design, lighting, sound and even the digital platform affect the participation and confidence of students. Hence, it is essential to design learning environments with care. Lastly, education is not limited to the walls of the classroom. Society, media and culture shape a person's identity and values. Teachers are a part of a larger network that influences students. As per material pedagogy, teaching is not only an act of a teacher. It is a phenomenon of a multitude of forces working together.

Conclusion

The novel *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice, when read from Bennett's theory of Vibrant Matter, compels one to rethink education by showing how learning emerges through encounters with material forces. Matters such as blood, darkness, confinement and urban settings engage in shaping Louis's awareness. Decentering the human teachers doesn't mean devaluing their importance. Rather, it reflects that learning is never shaped and produced by humans alone. It arises through the relationships between bodies,

matter and environment. In an age that is highly shaped by technological advancements, it is imperative to recognise distributed agencies. Educators become more attentive and learners become reflective when the involvement of matter is recognised and acknowledged in the teaching process.

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