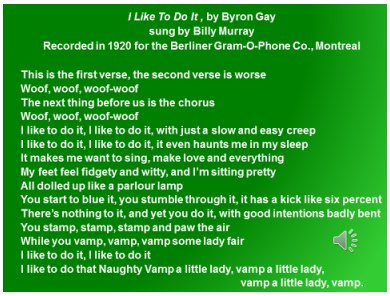
"Vampires, Vamps, and Vamping in the 1920's"

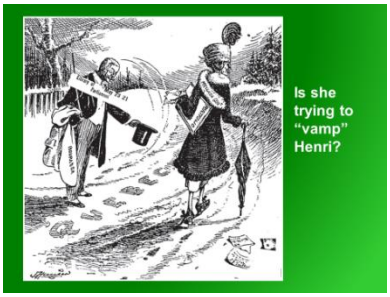


"I Like To Do It" was known as a novelty oriental fox-trot. Recorded in Montreal in 1920 by the American singer Billy Murray and composed by Byron Gay, it reveals an important transition in the image of vampires and vamps. The song is about a dance called The Naughty Vamp, and it's also about vamping -- the activity of flirting with or trying to seduce someone. But the words of the song take nothing seriously -- it satirizes seduction, with Murray pretending to be a 'wolf' -- a social and sexual predator -- by singing "Woof, woof". It satirizes popular songs -- telling us that the second verse is even worse than the first. It makes fun of obsession -- Murray sings that vamping haunts him, intoxicates him, and makes him go against his better judgement -- none of which he regrets. Simply the way that Billy Murray sings -- in a mannered, exaggerated style -- indicates that this is a send-up of vamps and vamping.

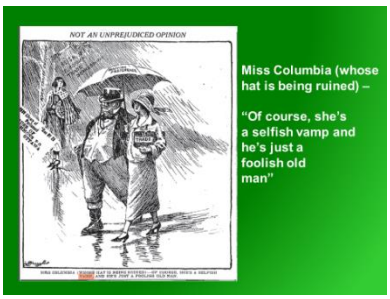
The song also satirizes orientalism -- the vamp dance, seen demonstrated here, mimicked the simultaneous profile and frontal view seen in ancient Egyptian paintings and reliefs, and involved what Murray describes as "a slow and easy creep", as well as stamping and "pawing the air". As well, the beginning notes of the song suggest the rhythm, repetition and 5-note scale stereotypical of non-western music.

"I Like To Do It" is an example of how, by the 1920's, the meaning of the word vamp was beginning to fragment. Already, vamp could refer to a man: a *Globe and Mail* article from 1922 criticized "the over-privileged young male", the "he-vamp". As well, the song mentions

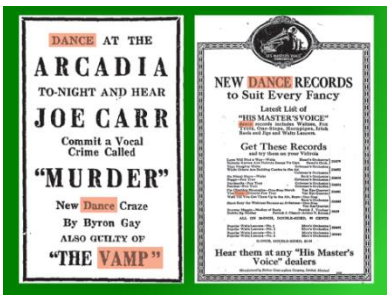
vamping a woman, and is sung by a man, so it could mean the seduction of a woman by a man, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the vamp usually meant a woman.



Here are a couple of examples of the continuing association of the word vamp with women -- In a political cartoon from 1920, the Meighen government, represented here by a prostitute strolling by the gentleman who doffs his hat, is portrayed as so desperate to acquire cabinet ministers from Quebec, it is willing to approach even Henri Bourassa, its arch-opponent, across the border in Quebec. The caption of the cartoon asks "Is she trying to 'vamp' Henri?"



And in this cartoon from 1923, the British Dominions are pictured as the haughty woman in the hat, holding a binder labeled "Trade". She is being sheltered from the rain by John Bull, representing Great Britain, and his umbrella, labeled "British Preference". She has seduced Great Britain into preferential trade agreements, to the irritation and envy of "Miss Columbia" -- the United States -- who is left standing in the rain, since the tree she's standing under gives her no protection. The editorial heading says "Not an Unprejudiced Opinion", and the caption tells us that Miss Columbia, whose hat is being ruined, comments that "Of course, she's a selfish vamp and he's just a foolish old man".

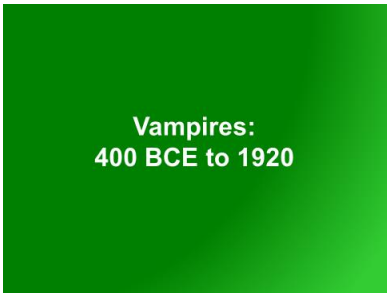


The Vamp was also a dance, -- seen here on the left in an advertisement for the Arcadia Dance Hall, which opened on College Street in Toronto in 1920. The ad announces a "New Dance Craze" by Byron Gay, who had written "The Vamp" just

before “I Like to Do It”. The Arcadia also featured “Theresa Neilson of New York, specialist in Egyptian dancing”.

The ad on the right, for “His Master’s Voice” records from 1920, also lists “The Vamp” as an Oriental Fox Trot. So by the 1920’s although the word ‘vamp’ usually meant a seductive female, ‘vamp’ had acquired multiple meanings, and was associated with entertainment, levity and humour.

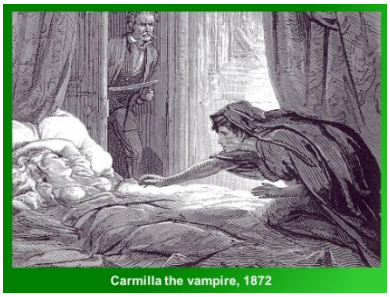
This light-hearted view of vamps and vamping did not exist before the 20th century. The ancestor of the vamp -- the Vampire -- from which the word vamp descended, had never been the object of satire. During their long history, vampires were always taken seriously.



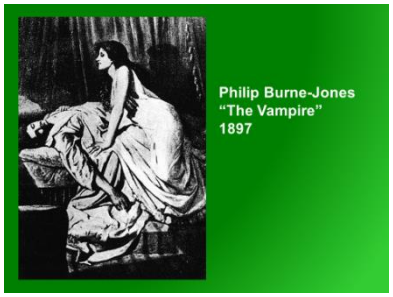
Vampires existed in literature and oral tradition as far back as ancient Greece (c. 400 BCE), and traditionally had basically one goal -- to seduce, mesmerize, enslave, torment and destroy a chosen person. They might destroy their victim by drinking their blood and thereby produce other vampires, and sometimes they drained their victims’ life-force over a protracted period of time. Significantly, the great majority of early vampires were women.

Vampires really came into their own in the years following the French Revolution with the aesthetic movement known as Romanticism. Romanticism was characterized by an interest in exoticism and faraway, non-western locations, mental states, intense emotions, insanity, and social turmoil. At the beginning of the 19th century, interest in all things “Eastern” and “Oriental” was sparked by the first translations into French, then English, of *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *The Arabian Nights.* Tales of vampires were integrated with

Romanticist orientalism by authors such as Goethe, Byron, Polidori, Keats and Baudelaire. Baudelaire's 1857 poem "The Vampire's Metamorphoses", describing the attributes of the archetypal *femme fatale*, was censored and the author fined.



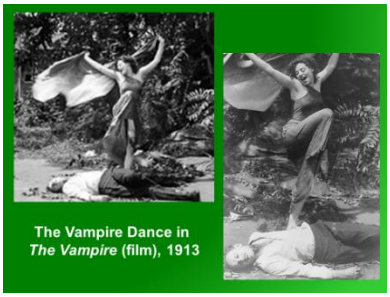
By the late 1800's vampires abounded, with Le Fanu's introduction of the undead Carmilla. A precursor of Dracula, Carmilla preys on young girls, sleeps most of the daylight hours, roams around at night in the shape of a large cat-like creature, and is only killed when her body is dug up and destroyed.



1897 marked a crescendo of interest in vampires. That year, Philip Burne-Jones exhibited his most famous painting, first in London, then in New York. Burne-Jones' painting was called "The Vampire", and showed a woman identifiable as the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who had broken off her relationship with the painter, leaning over the prostrate figure of a man. Critics drew attention to its off-putting greenish tone, and its unpleasant subject. To add to the great public interest in the painting, the artist's cousin Rudyard Kipling, composed a poem called "A Fool There Was", which appeared in the exhibition catalogue next to the reproduction of the painting.

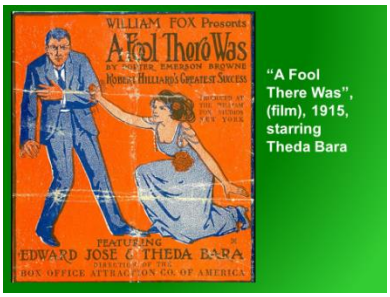
Kipling's poem, brought to life by Burne-Jones' painting, exemplified the image of the female vampire in the Victorian imagination. She was beautiful, sexual. had long, dark, hair, was relentless in her pursuit of a man, triumphant in her complete destruction of the victim, and surrounded by an atmosphere of tragedy, because the man's obsessive attraction resulted in the dissolution of his family.

Twelve years later (1909) the painting and the poem became inextricably linked when an American playwright wrote *A Fool There Was*, a melodrama detailing the downfall of a married man who abandons his wife and children for a life of torment in the company of a vampire. Burne-Jones' painting was reproduced on the cover of the published play, and recreated again onstage in the final scene. *A Fool There Was* came to the Princess Theatre in Toronto in March of 1910, where it won great praise from the reviewer, but who also needed to warn the audience that "The story of the play is not at all a very pleasant one." The real-life presentation of a malevolent, supernatural being in the form of a beautiful woman thrilled the public. It was so popular that an audio recitation was released in 1911 and the production was still playing in Toronto in 1915.



A Fool There Was -- the poem and the play -- and *The Vampire* -- the painting -- took on a life of their own, inspiring 'The Vampire Dance', which was showcased in the 1913 film *The Vampire,* seen here in two stills of Alice Eis, and her husband Bert French, who subsequently made the dance famous on stage.

On the left, a clipping of Alice Eis, with the headline "The Vampire That Lured 'The Fool There Was'", and on the right, Alice Eis performing The Vampire Dance, the Egyptian-esque precursor of Byron Gay's Vampire Dance. As an indication of how seriously the idea of a vampire was taken, the headline answers critics by proclaiming "She Doesn't Need Clothes, Her Art Covers Her".



"A Fool There Was", (film), 1915, starring Theda Bara

In 1915 Fox Pictures released the film "A Fool There Was", based on the 1909 play, and starring Theda Bara as the Vampire. Interestingly, by this time newspapers were incorrectly referring to Kipling's poem as "The Vampire". Here's what the *Globe and Mail* had to say about it:

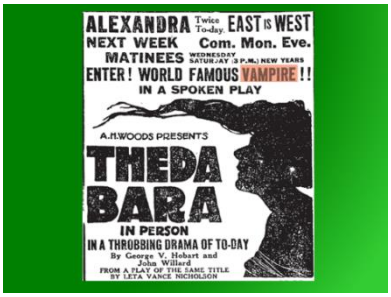
> The fine photo-play "A Fool There Was", the film adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Vampire", is doing tremendous business at the Strand Theatre, where it will continue to be presented throughout the remainder of this week, including New Year's Day. The photo-play is superbly acted and sumptuously staged, and Theda Bara, in the role of the "vampire woman", is magnificent.

Motion Picture News called the film "powerfully absorbing", "gripping and tenacious", and added that the film might "perhaps harm" those who saw it, thereby guaranteeing its success. In this scene from the film, the vampire, Theda Bara, has totally enslaved the foolish businessman, who lies helpless at her feet. To her delight, he has abandoned his family and friends, and wants nothing but to do her bidding.

In this publicity still for the film, Theda Bara exhibits the traditional attributes of the vampire -- attractiveness, long, dark, hair, sexuality, exoticism, and as evidence of her mesmerizing effect on men, the fact that she has apparently reduced her would-be suitor to a skeleton.

The tone of high seriousness with which this kind of publicity, and all these performances were approached, whether on the stage or screen, is significant -- because it did not last. The transition of vampires to vamps had two catalysts -- Hollywood and the Great War.

Up to the 20th century, the vampire had lived in readers' and listeners' imaginations. In the Hollywood film or on the Broadway stage the vampire was robbed of her imaginary power. Moreover, in the face of the real horrors of the first modern war, the vampire's activities appeared trivial by comparison.

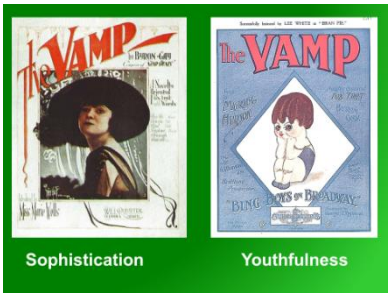


Less than five years after the appearance of the film, Theda Bara had been re-named a "vamp" -- and the vamp, although retaining many of the superficial characteristics of the female vampire, lost her association with dread, terror and the supernatural. The 19th century vampire, enslaver of men, had been transformed into the vamp -- a sexy, light-hearted flirt, who was often called 'naughty', and who would soon cut her hair and emerge as the modern flapper.

An explanation of this kind of change is offered by a theory from the field of Communications. Symbolic Convergence Theory proposes that through literature, oral accounts, and visual art, people develop a consensus about the reality in which they live. In this case, a consensus about the image of female vampires, based in tradition and disseminated through improved print technology and means of communication, which developed rapidly over the course of the 19th century. This was the image of the female vampire as a dreaded destroyer of men. According to the theory, the convergence of ideas will fragment when an event changes the reality -- in this case, the Great War brought the kinds of real terror that obliterated the consensus

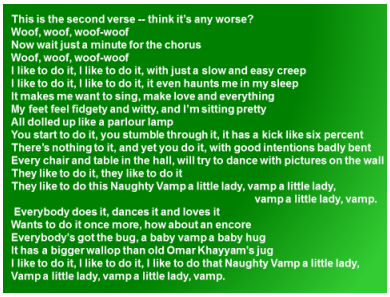
about the terror of vampires, and introduced the idea of irony into the interpretation of reality. The female vampire that haunted the Victorian imagination did not survive the real horror of the trenches, nor the impersonal gaze of the movie camera.

After the Great War, the non-threatening image of the modern vamp retained some traditional characteristics, such as friendly exoticism. On the left, on the cover of the sheet music for Byron Gay's song "The Vamp", the image evokes Carmen, and on the right a fanciful rendering of a woman from Armenia.



Byron Gay's song could also be illustrated by a sophisticated woman gazing seductively from under a large picture hat, on the left, or on the right, by a "Baby Vamp", the nickname for a popular or attractive young woman.

Ads for new recordings in 1921 listed "Laughing Vamp'", "Sally Green, the Village Vamp" and "Vamping Rose". A 1922 film called *Exit - The Vamp,* featured a wife who decides to seduce her husband herself, and rescues him from his infatuation with another woman. By 1925, the word 'vampire' to refer to woman, had virtually disappeared from everyday discourse.



Billy Murray's and Byron Gay's song "I Like To Do It", describing the Naughty Vamp dance, represents a very brief transition between the ancient understanding of the female vampire, and the modern flapper. The song reflects the beginnings of modernity that filtered through Canadian popular culture in the wake of the Great War.