

Creating History: How to Construct a Vampire's Fictional Background

by David Mcmasters

Imagine a figure silhouetted against the light of a streetlamp. It whirls, like a startled wild thing, and then is gone. But the image remains in the mind's eye, recalling darker shadows and other visions from our ancestral memory: A figure silhouetted by gaslight, by candle's flame, by leaping flames. For as long as man has been around, there have been others hiding in the shadows.

How can you capture this sense of history? How can you turn the shade into a three-dimensional entity full of vitality and weighted with the experience and memory of centuries? What follows are some thoughts on constructing a vampiric persona, whether it be for a story or a roleplaying game.

Life is transient. To an immortal creature like the vampire, mortal life is fleeting. It may awaken echoes of his own breathing life, but his role all too often becomes that of observer. No matter how close he gets to another, what crowd he associates with, barring the use of the Dark Gift, they will fade away, leaving only memories of his time among them.

Think about how the vampire chooses to interact with mortals and with others of his kind. Does he choose not to feel the pain of loss, burying his emotions and remaining aloof and dispassionate? Or does he eagerly embrace every new experience, moving through history and form new acquaintances as much as possible, replacing those lost to time with new companions and savoring each moment as if he, too, were mortal?

An effective way to do this is to think about the vampire now. Then go back in time and examine what changed him. Examine the forces that may have acted to bring him to the state he's at. The loss of someone close can change one's outlook dramatically, whether they be mortal or vampire. He may withdraw to avoid being hurt again or he may embrace the experience, mourning and learning from it, progressing and growing.

Even vampires may die, passing from the world and their loss may be particularly poignant to others of the Kindred. The Final Death may have a much greater impact, but again, this depends on the individual vampire's outlook on life (or unlife).

Always keep it simple. When constructing a history, remember that the vampire may not have been at the center of major happenings, may not have ever met anyone famous or important, and may have lived her life in complete ignorance. It may be hard to remember, with the rapid pace of communications today, but people were not always so well informed. The further back in history one goes, the slower news traveled and news of battles, of new learning, of changes in rulers, often took weeks or months to travel, often arriving in distorted form as third-hand tales of events that had no impact on the life of the listener.

This is not to rule out the possibility of an encounter with the learned, the mighty, or the historically important. Observe how many people, artists particularly, who were not recognized for their contributions until after their death. Rimbaud was regarded as a madman at points in his life and Mozart died penniless. Equally, remember that the vampire will have the same perspective as her contemporaries, perhaps recognizing the spark of greatness in certain persons or seeing the pivotal importance of certain events, but yet tempered by the prevailing attitudes and opinions. Battles are not glamorous affairs where the typical conscript sees the ultimate strategic result of a particular engagement. Agincourt may be remembered as a horrible experience filled with the whistle of arrows, shrieks of the dying and fields mud, rather than for a pivotal engagement in the Hundred Years War were English longbowmen were first seen. The Kindred are not prescient and, while they have the advantage of long hindsight, witnessed events firsthand and have those biases.

Individuals are shaped by experience. Fifty or a hundred years is a blink of the eye in terms of history. Even a young vampire may have already experienced a full mortal's lifespan with the potential for many more. The older the vampire, the more lifetimes of accumulated experience and learning she will have. Think about how this time has been spent. If the vampire lived for five centuries in France, it

would be reasonable to assume that her speech may be littered with bits of French. An occasional unconscious utterance adds depth and believability to a character. It should never be forced or self-conscious, however, unless it is a deliberate affectation; One may pretend to be from a different social background in order to hide a lower-class upbringing (or vice-versa!)

Individuals become jaded by experiencing the same things over and over. An experience that might interest a mortal or a younger vampire, may bore one of the ancients to tears. Certain habits may become ingrained and therefore predictable, while the vampire may also be able to predict the behavior of others, having the experience of lifetimes of human interaction. Think about things that you do unconsciously, whether they be bad habits or skills that are fluid with years of repetition. Multiply that ten-, twenty-, or even fifty-fold, and you begin to grasp the essence of an immortal creature like a vampire.

If you wish to create a believable vampire persona, research is an excellent idea. Start with the ideas and personality you wish to create, fill in the history, the events that shaped the persona, and, finally, add those little details that create a whole entity.

For each skill or habit the vampire possesses, you should ask yourself where it came from, how was it learned and why. If something doesn't make sense, discard it. Nothing is worse than when a vampire exhibits some esoteric bit of knowledge without any logic behind that information.

Listed below are some books that may be of interest or that I think display some insight into the idea of a vampire with history or depth. Some of them, like Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's works, are rather slow and dry to many, but the history is of interest to the more serious scholar. Other fictional works by authors like Saberhagen or Elrod are lighter reading (some would say too light), but they're useful in showing how a few details can go a long way.

Fiction

The Empire of Fear by Brian Stableford

The Delicate Dependency by Michael Talbot

Thorn by Fred Saberhagen

The Stress of Her Regard by Tim Powers

Those Who Hunt the Night by Barbara Hambly

Blood Games by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

Non-Fiction

Characters and Viewpoint by Orson Scott Card (The Elements of Fiction Writing Series)

The People's Chronology by James Trager

The Coterie of Shattered Dreams

Announces

A Mini-Convention

To be held September 30th-October 1st

At the Everett Legion Hall

This event will run from 6 P.M. Friday, September 30th, until late on October 1st, actually ending at 1 A.M. Sunday, October 2nd. This will be a full-service event with a Hospitality Room, A Dance and a Live Action Game that will run the entire convention. The cost to attend is \$10.00 per person in advance.

It should be noted that in order for this event to take place, 50 paid attendees are required.

Contact John Jacobson at (206) 353-1652 to buy an admission or for further information.