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## The Pain of an Amputated Limb: Subjective Morality and Existentialism in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*

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**"The Pain of an Amputated Limb: Subjective Morality and Existentialism in Anne Rice's Interview With the Vampire"**

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THE PAIN OF AN AMPUTATED LIMB

Subjective Morality and Existentialism in Anne Rice's Interview With the Vampire

Aaron J. Klamer

Honors Thesis — April, 1998

Over the last century, perhaps no genre of literature has so enthralled, interested, and provoked the public's intellect as those pieces which fall under the somewhat ambiguous appellation, "existentialist" literature. Novels by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus spawned generations of followers, including Ernest Hemingway, Richard Wright, and Franz Kafka. Today, Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles, and especially the first book Interview With the Vampire, exemplify the characteristics of an existential novel. No doubt much of the reason for the popularity of the existential novel has to do with empathy; we see ourselves reflected in the characters. In order to learn anything from them, however, we must understand the sorts of issues that are being dealt with. The way to do this is by examining existential philosophy, the writings of those who dealt with questions of existence and human life. The work of Jean-Paul Sartre is an excellent model for analyzing Interview With the Vampire, and using it as such helps to explain the actions and motivations of the main character Louis. Louis is transformed into a vampire and is faced with the same problems as modern man; neither have any knowledge of their true nature or how they should act. Studying Louis' existential predicament can help us to better face our own, and by showing that immortality and power lead to despair and detachment, Rice tells us to take advantage of our limited lifetimes and live them to the fullest.

The novel is in the form of an interview, an interview with the vampire. He tells the story of his life and undeath to a young man who interviews people for a living. Louis becomes a vampire in the year 1791, when he is 25 years old. He owns two indigo plantations in Mississippi, and as the oldest sibling, he supports his mother, brother, and sister. His brother, Paul, who becomes more and more fanatically religious, has visions that both St. Dominic and the Virgin

Mary visit him and tell him that his family must sell all their property and possessions, and give the money to him so that he may become a great religious leader. Louis, as the owner of the property and possessions, is understandably skeptical of his brother's visions, and tells him that there is no way he will comply. An argument ensues, and as Paul leaves, Louis sees him fall down a flight of stone stairs and break his neck. He dies instantly. Louis feels responsible for his death, and degenerates into alcoholism. He says, "I lived like a man who wanted to die but had no courage to do it himself" (11). It is in this condition that he is found by a vampire.

This vampire's name is Lestat, and he wants to take control of Louis' resources by making him his vampire slave. He attacks Louis and drains his blood almost to the point of death. Later, he visits Louis and tells him that he can give him eternal life. Louis finds it impossible to refuse this dream of immortality which men have pursued since they came into existence, and so he becomes a vampire. Lestat cuts his own wrist and allows Louis to drink from it; this blood is the life, and Louis must replenish it every night by feeding on the blood of living creatures. At this point Louis starts to regret his acceptance of Lestat's "dark gift."

His main problem, at the outset, is that he is unwilling to do what is necessary for survival, that is, to kill. He says, "I had a most high regard for the life of others, and a horror of death most recently developed because of my brother" (16). This horror makes it difficult for him to partake in what is essentially an initiation, watching Lestat take a human life. "This is unbearable," he says after witnessing it, "I want to die" (17). With this sort of reaction to witnessing the taking of a life, one can only imagine the trauma Louis would face upon actually taking one himself. Before he has to do so, however, he must rest, he must get into a coffin with Lestat.

This feature of vampire existence also holds problems for Louis. As he says, “the coffin struck such a chord of terror in me I think it absorbed all the capacity for terror I had left.” As Louis argues with Lestat, not wanting to get into the coffin with him, he comes to an extremely helpful realization: he is no longer a human, and therefore isn’t constrained by his human fears and emotions. “I couldn’t bear the idea,” he says, “but as we argued, I realized I had no real fear ... I was simply remembering it. Hanging on to it from habit, from a deficiency of ability to recognize my present and exhilarating freedom” (25). Lestat realizes what Louis is experiencing without needing to be told, he says, “you shouldn’t be feeling this fear at all. I think you’re like a man who loses an arm or leg and keeps insisting he can feel pain where the arm or leg used to be” (25). Louis agrees and gets into the coffin. Throughout the rest of the novel, Louis suffers from a similar “deficiency of ability to recognize [his] present and exhilarating freedom,” but it takes him much longer to assimilate himself to other aspects of being a vampire. He loses the arm or leg of human morality, but he still feels the pain of being unwilling to take human life.

He feels this pain acutely the next night, when Lestat takes him out to make his first kill. He is revolted by the experience. “I had my dead limbs to contend with ... to use his comparison,” he says (26). His discomfort is not only moral, but physical. He feeds on the slave Lestat holds for him too fast and too long, and it makes him ill. This nausea in tandem with his disgust at Lestat and the whole situation make his first kill a traumatic experience. He is disgusted at Lestat’s callous disregard for human life, which he still sees as being precious and not to be taken lightly. This being the case, he feels a sense of relief when Lestat reveals to him that he can live off the blood of animals. He begins to do this, and so avoids his anguish over taking human life for quite some time.

Right around this time, Louis realizes that Lestat gave him eternal life for a rather mundane reason: he wanted his money and property. When Louis begins to express discontent with the way Lestat is treating him, and threatens to throw him out, Lestat plays his trump card. “Why would you do that?”, he asks, “with mock alarm. ‘You don’t know everything yet ... do you? ... You don’t know, for example, all the ways you can die. And dying now would be *such* a calamity, wouldn’t it?’” (34). Louis realizes, that for the time being at least, he is stuck with Lestat, and with his situation.

This situation is, in many ways, similar to the one in which we find ourselves as human beings. Without anyone to tell us who we are or how to act, we are forced to choose our essence for ourselves. Like Louis, we have people who tell us they know the answers, and who expect money or service in return for their knowledge. However, neither Lestat nor the world’s priests and prophets really know anything more. The world is, finally, incomprehensible to both Louis and human beings.

Louis believes that it is wrong to take human life. Questions of the morality of his actions proceed logically to queries into his very essence. What am I?, he asks himself, and what does that entail in regards to the morality which I am expected to follow? The actual words he uses are “I don’t know what I am! I am to live to the end of the world, and I do not even know what I am!” (70). Questions of this sort occupied the prolific mind of Jean-Paul Sartre. Much of Sartre’s work, however, was concerned not with the essence of vampires, obviously, but with the essence of *humanity*, and what that entailed in regards to the morality which *they* were expected to follow.

Sartre’s observations about the essence of man are very useful in studying the essence of

Louis as a vampire, because he gave no conclusive answers, but merely suggested how life can be lived with the knowledge that there is no knowledge. That is, there is no way for us to know how to act, and therefore, there are no objective moral values. Louis is tormented throughout the first half of the novel because he remains shackled by his human sensibilities. He still has the perspective of a Christian human, and so he must believe that there are objective moral values and therefore, that he is damned. What he comes to realize is that this is no longer his perspective, and in his new subjective experience, the only value which he need hold to is that of his own life, and in that, the taking of others'.

Louis has the freedom to make this moral re-evaluation, according to Sartre, because he, like all human beings, has an existence which precedes his essence. He wrote,

“What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be”

(Oaklander 310-11).

So Louis, when he first comes into existence as a man, must define himself, according to his circumstances and the things he chooses. But when he is transformed into a vampire, he must essentially start over, because his circumstances are drastically different. Things which may have been subjectively wrong for him before may now be right, because of the situation which he is in. The best example of this is, of course, the taking of life, which is now a necessary condition for survival.

Louis avoids his moral dilemma for the first four years of his existence as a vampire by



feeding on the blood of animals. Rats, alley cats, chickens and the like provided him with the life-giving sanguinary solution which he needed to survive. However, this arrangement is hardly fulfilling for Louis. Day after day, he laments his fate, all the while perpetuating it by drinking the blood of domesticated animals and vermin. But one fateful night, he discovers the one thing which can provide him with meaning and fulfillment: taking human life. As he says later in the novel, "I knew peace only when I killed, only for that minute; and there was no question in my mind that the killing of anything less than a human being brought nothing but a vague longing..." (87). The reason for this is not really given in the text; one can only assume that it is for the same reason that real food provides much more nourishment and satisfaction to humans than taking vitamins and drinking water.

Louis mentions to his interviewer that Lestat should not have made him start with people, and the interviewer asks, "do you mean for you it was an aesthetic choice, not a moral one?" (71). Louis answer provides us with some of his thoughts on morality and his existence.

"Had you asked me then, I would have told you it was aesthetic, that I wished to understand death in stages. That the death of an animal yielded such pleasure and experience to me that I had only begun to understand it, and wished to save the experience of human death for my mature understanding."

But this is not how he feels now. He explains his new conception of his morality by means of an example:

"An artist, stealing paints from a store, for example, imagines himself to have made an inevitable but immoral decision, and then he sees himself as fallen from grace; what follows is despair and petty irresponsibility, as if morality were a great glass world which

can be utterly shattered by one act. But his was not my great concern then. I did not know these things then. I believed I killed animals for aesthetic reasons only, and I hedged against the great moral question of whether or not by my very nature I was damned” (72).

This fictional artist represents Louis: at the beginning of his existence as a vampire, he imagines himself to be making “an inevitable but immoral decision,” and also sees himself as “fallen from grace.” But throughout the course of his existence, he comes to find out that morality is not, indeed, “a great glass world which can be utterly shattered by one act,” or even repeated acts. Morality, for him as well as Sartre, is based on what he chooses, on his subjective experience. Since his existence precedes his essence, he is nothingness, and no values are objective. Since there is no *a priori* good, each man, or vampire, must create his own values based on his own subjective experience.

On page 74, Louis finally faces “the great moral question of whether or not by [his] very nature [he is] damned.”

“I was agitated that night, as I told you. I had hedged against this question as a vampire and now it completely overwhelmed me, and in that state I had no desire to live.

Well, this produced in me, as it can in humans, a craving for that which will satisfy at least physical desire ...”

Louis is speaking here of his bloodlust, which is closely analogous to sexual desire in humans. Vampires not only hunger for blood, but *desire* it. “For vampires,” says Louis, “physical love culminates and is satisfied in one thing, the kill” (255). As the most intimate way for a vampire to interact with another being, the kill is closely related to sex. In reflection, Louis says of sex, “I

think it was the pale shadow of killing” (209). Even for Louis as a victim, the kill is erotic. When Lestat feeds on him and turns him into a vampire, Louis recalls, “I remember that the movement of his lips raised the hair all over my body, sent a shock of sensation through my body that was not unlike the pleasure of passion.” The kill is also the vampire’s means of procreation, like sex for humans, and vampires and humans alike seek solace from the ennui of life through their respective act of physical love. When we left Louis, he was wandering the streets, starving and nearly suicidal.

“...Am I damned? Am I from the devil? Is my very nature that of a devil? I was asking myself over and over. And if it is, why then do I revolt against it ... what have I become in becoming a vampire? Where am I to go? And all the while, as the death wish caused me to neglect my thirst, my thirst grew hotter; my veins were veritable threads of pain in my flesh; my temples throbbed; and finally I could stand it no longer. Torn apart by the wish to take no action – to starve, to wither in thought on the one hand; and driven to kill on the other – I stood in an empty, desolate street and heard the sound of a child crying” (72-3).

Here is an authentic existential crisis, and it is the culmination of Louis’ four-year struggle with his very nature. Unable to find happiness through his mortal conception of morality and the world, he finds himself forced to confront his divided nature in a situation removed from any observation, and thus moral condemnation, by others. Here another parallel between Louis and humankind becomes evident: they both possess an often undeniable will to live. This will possesses Louis, this will leads him to follow the sound of the crying child’s voice. And ultimately, it is this will which causes him to take a human life for the first time in four years.

It is not the first human life he has taken, of course, but his first was a horrible experience for him, and so he chose to live off the blood of animals. But unbiased by the shock of human death, he gives in to his bloodlust and feeds on the crying child, Claudia. This experience so moves him that it changes his entire perspective.

“...I felt, yes, damned and this is hell, and in that instant I had bent down and driven hard into her soft, small neck and, hearing her tiny cry, whispered even as I felt the hot blood on my lips, ‘It’s only for a moment and there’ll be no more pain.’ But she was locked to me, and I was soon incapable of saying anything ... for four years I hadn’t really known ... I think I rose to my feet still locked to her, the heart pulling on my heart faster with no hope of cease, the rich blood rushing too fast for me, the room reeling, and then, despite myself, I was staring over her bent head, her open mouth...” (74-5).

Here Louis embraces his subjectivity and makes the moral change to accompany his physical one. As Camus said, “His future, his unique and dreadful future -- he sees and rushes toward it.” He realizes that to continue on his present course is to condemn himself to an eternal hell.

Louis’ failure to stick to his earlier decision not to kill human beings brings to mind Sartre’s discussion of “The Gambler,” who similarly fails in his efforts to cease gambling, “who has freely and sincerely decided not to gamble anymore and who, when he approaches the gaming table, suddenly sees all his resolutions melt away.” Sartre’s analysis of the gambler provides insight into Louis’ motivation apart from his burning hunger.

“The earlier resolution of ‘not playing anymore’ is always *there*, and in the majority of cases the gambler when in the presence of the gaming table, turns toward it as if to ask it for help; for he does not wish to play, or rather having taken his resolution the

day before, he thinks of himself still as not wishing to play anymore; he believes in the effectiveness of this resolution. But what he apprehends then in anguish is precisely the total inefficacy of the past resolution. It is there doubtless but fixed, ineffectual, surpassed by the very fact that I am conscious *of* it. The resolution is still *me* to the extent that I realize constantly my identity with myself across the temporal flux, but it is no longer *me* – due to the fact that it has become an object *for* my consciousness. I am not subject to it, it fails in the mission which I have given it” (Oaklander 258).

Sartre thought this way because of his views on human nature; he believed that we constantly re-create ourselves, because at each moment we are conscious only of the present, and while our past influences us to the extent that we have acted certain ways in the past, it has no actual control over our actions in the here and now. At each moment we are free to create ourselves “*ex nihilo*.” This is why Sartre said we are “condemned to be free,” because while we are free to create ourselves, we are not free to not do so. We are condemned in the sense that we are forced, we are free in the sense that we choose for ourselves, based on our own subjective experience, what is right for us. Louis recognizes this freedom when he feeds on Claudia and escapes his daily torment. Thus, his earlier worries of being damned are overcome. Perhaps he realizes that no longer being a mortal, hell no longer waits for him. Perhaps he merely was driven to kill by his overwhelming bloodlust. Whatever the case, perhaps partially driven by his new sense of perspective, he decides to leave Lestat. The conversation which ensues is very useful for our current analysis.

Lestat begins his end of the discussion with his characteristic flippant scorn. “I thought as much,” he says, “and I thought as well that you would make a flowery announcement. Tell me

what a monster I am; what a vulgar fiend' (80). Here Lestat is making fun of Louis, although Louis does not realize it. He is secretly laughing at Louis' moral condemnations, because he, as a vampire much older and more mentally secure than Louis, realizes that such human judgments mean nothing. Once again, it is because of the lack of objective moral values that such judgments do not apply to Lestat. Louis, however, continues to make them, chastising Lestat: "'Why did you become a vampire?' I blurted out. 'And why such a vampire as you are! Vengeful and delighting in taking human life even when you have no need ... as if tempting the gods to strike you down for your blasphemy!'" Lestat, for perhaps the first time in the novel, attempts to reason with Louis. "What do you think a vampire is?" he asks Louis (81). This is a question which Louis has only begun to ask himself, and yet it is of the utmost importance for him. In asking this question, Lestat was trying to indicate to Louis that killing is not wrong for the vampire, because it is an essential feature of his existence. Speaking again of humankind, if we are to know our purpose in life and the acceptable and beneficial ways to go about meeting it, then we must know what it is to be a human. Similarly, Louis cannot know what it means to be a vampire or how to be one if he does not know what one is. "I don't pretend to know. You pretend to know. What is it?" he asks Lestat (81). "And to this he answered nothing." "I know that after leaving you, I shall try to find out ...(81) ...I'm interested in my own nature now, and I've come to believe I can't trust you to tell me the truth about it" (80). Louis has finally accepted that Lestat cannot help him in his search for absolute knowledge. He must discover value in a world without them. And this brings us to Sartre's views on anguish as an essential feature of human existence.

For Sartre, anguish is what we feel in the face of our overwhelming freedom. Like Nietzsche's ship lost at sea, we swirl in a world without objective truths and values.

Overwhelmed by our freedom, we are faced with anguish.

“According to Sartre, anguish is the consciousness of our freedom. Anguish in the face of our past is our consciousness that we are always separated from our past essence by nothingness and thus that we are free to be what we are (our past essence) or not to be it” (Oaklander 221).

Until his experience with Claudia, Louis, like many human beings, thinks that he is, to some extent, what he is (his past essence). However, the nature of this past essence prevents him from being happy, and so he feels anguish even more: not only does he not know how to act, but when he tries to make decisions based on his previous experience, it makes him miserable. Over a long period of time, he realizes that the way to avoid anguish is to embrace it, to embrace his freedom and give his decisions value merely by deciding them. Sartre wrote,

“It is a matter of a simple sort of anguish that anybody who has had responsibilities is familiar with. For example, when a military officer takes the responsibility for an attack and sends a certain number of men to death, he chooses to do so, and in the main he alone makes the choice. Doubtless, orders come from above, but they are too broad; he interprets them, and on this interpretation depend the lives of ten or fourteen or twenty men. In making a decision he can not help having a certain anguish. All leaders know this anguish. That doesn't keep them from acting; on the contrary, it is the very condition of their action. For it implies that they envisage a number of possibilities, and when they choose one, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen” (Oaklander 312).

In a world without objective values, value can only be found in the subjective. The right choice is what is chosen. This is why Louis has the freedom to kill human beings.

It should not be construed that anyone is justified by Sartre's morality to kill without regret. Sartre believed that "in choosing myself, I choose man" (Oaklander 310). In other words, when a man makes a decision in a certain situation, he is essentially saying that any man in the same situation should do the same. No one, without being purposefully obtuse, can assert that murder is right for anyone, anytime. Considerations of reputation and reciprocity restrain the rational man from such an action. But for Louis, murder, if that is the correct word, is justified by the conditions of his existence in much the same way that killing cows and chickens is justifiable for humans. On the question of a vampire's morality, as throughout the Vampire Chronicles, Lestat gets the final word:

"Evil is a point of view ... we are immortal. And what we have before us are the rich feasts that conscience cannot appreciate and mortal men cannot know without regret. God kills, and so shall we; indiscriminately He takes the richest and poorest, and so shall we; for no creatures under God are as we are, none so like Him as ourselves, dark angels not confined to the stinking limits of hell but wandering His earth and all its kingdoms" (88-9).

Now that Louis has solved his moral dilemma, he wishes to leave Lestat and find other vampires who can tell him all the secrets Lestat cannot reveal to him: how vampires came into existence, what their purpose is in the world, and what their relation is to God. Obviously, these questions are the same ones which humankind has been trying to figure out since they could ponder them. The second half of the novel chronicles Louis' attempts to find other vampires and



answer these questions. But before he can accomplish this, he encounters another problem.

Lestat is still financially dependent on Louis, and so he is unwilling to just let him go so easily. He hatches a wicked egg of a plan: he turns the child Claudia into a vampire, and entreaties Louis to stay and help him “raise” her. Louis’ compassionate nature once again gets the best of him — he can’t help but stay and look after her, especially since he played such a direct role in her creation. He ends up staying with Lestat and Claudia for another 65 years.

Claudia, as it turns out, provides many insights into the questions of instinct and human nature, because being transformed into a vampire so young, she *has* no human nature. She is raised as a vampire by vampires, and so being a vampire is all she knows. Her body stays eternally childlike, but she develops the mind of an adult. She provides an interesting counter-example to Louis, who had such a difficult time forgetting his human upbringing. “...I knew her to be less human than either of us,” says Louis, “not the faintest conception bound her to the sympathies of human nature” (149). At times this seems to bother Louis, he seems to see her as somewhat of a monster, but when his interviewer suggests that he could have taught her human nature, he answers, “To what avail? So she might suffer as I did?” (149). Louis is beginning to realize that, although his mortal nature has sentimental value for him, it is ultimately a burden.

Soon Claudia too tires of Lestat, and wishes to leave him. She is very close to Louis, and she shares his curiosity about the existence of other vampires. She plots to kill Lestat, being the heartless killer she is, and wander the earth with Louis, looking for others of their kind. Louis of course is horrified at this idea, but when she actually goes about executing her plan, and therefore Lestat, he stands idly by and lets it happen. In this way, Louis and Claudia are freed from Lestat for the first time and are free to pursue their questions and seek other vampires.

Their quest brings them to Europe. Claudia has been voraciously reading texts of vampire legend and folklore, and she is convinced that Europe is the origin of the vampire race. They wander Europe for years, and the only vampires they discover are like animals, dirty, living outside, unable to communicate or relate to anyone in any way other than blind rage. Confused and disappointed, they come to Paris.

In Paris, they find the object of their search, other vampires, only to find out that these vampires cannot conclusively answer their questions either. They are part of a theater troupe, the Theatre des Vampires, who stage shows nightly under the guise that they are humans pretending to be vampires. The oldest and most powerful among them is a vampire named Armand, who is drawn to Louis' passion. After four hundred years, Armand has lost this passion which is born of human emotion. Louis, too, is drawn to Armand. He says, "I felt now the rarest, most acute alleviation of loneliness ... it was as if the great feminine longing of my mind were being awakened again to be satisfied" (236). Louis learns from Armand that no vampire has any knowledge of God or of their ultimate purpose, and his soliloquy to Lestat earlier in the novel comes to be strikingly relevant.

"You know nothing ... and suppose the vampire who made you knew nothing, and the vampire before him knew nothing, and so it goes back and back, nothing proceeding from nothing, until there is nothing! And we must live with the knowledge that there is no knowledge" (120).

Through his conversation with Armand, Louis finds out what Lestat knew all along: that this is true, that there is no knowledge. "It was as I'd always feared," he says, "and it was as lonely, it was as totally without hope. Things would go on as they had before, on and on. My search was

over” (238).

Louis must now begin a new search: a search to find meaning in his existence now that he is certain that it has none. He ends up doing this in the same way as many humans: by immersing himself in love for another. Armand, as an old and wise vampire, has much to offer the perpetually confused Louis. Louis says, “in Europe I’d found no truths to lessen loneliness, transform despair. Rather, I’d found only the inner workings of my own small soul, the pain of Claudia’s, and a passion for a vampire who was perhaps more evil than Lestat, but in whom I saw the only promise of good in evil of which I could conceive” (276). This good is detachment, lack of remorse. Louis recognizes that this is the only thing which can save him from utter despair and suicide. “He alone can give me the strength to be what I am,” says Louis. He loves Armand. “Not physical love, you must understand,” says Louis. “I don’t speak of that at all, though Armand was beautiful and simple, and no intimacy with him would ever have been repellent ... I speak of another kind of love which drew me to him completely as the teacher which Lestat had never been.” Armand, too, wants Louis, for he is attracted to his passion, his sensitivity and appreciation for life. “Boredom is death,” says one of the vampires of the theater, this is the reason Armand needs Louis. He is growing tired of life; his detachment allows him to be without regret, but it provides him with no meaning other than existence per se. “It is through you,” says Armand, “that I can save myself from the despair which I’ve described to you as our death. It is through you that I must make my link with this nineteenth century and come to understand it in a way that will revitalize me, which I so desperately need” (286). Louis desperately needs Armand as well, but before he can join him he must provide Claudia with a means to survive on her own. Still having the form of a child, she is weak and incapable of being self-sufficient. Claudia does

not wish Louis to leave her, but she recognizes that if he does not he will suffer horribly. She comes up with the idea of having Louis make her another vampire companion. She chooses a mortal woman, Madeleine, but Louis is not so quick to agree. "I will not make her one of us," he protests, "I will not damn the legions of mortals who'll die at her hands if I do!" Eventually, however, he realizes that it is the only way he can leave Claudia and join Armand, and so he does the deed. This act brings Louis closer to detachment. "What has died tonight in this room was not that woman ... what has died in this room tonight is the last vestige in me of what was human" (273). Louis says his goodbyes to Claudia and goes off to join Armand.

Ironically, what Armand loves in Louis is eventually destroyed by their relationship. Louis learns the detachment which he seeks, but it destroys the passion which Armand loves about him. Says Louis,

"I never changed after that. I sought for nothing in the one great source of change which is humanity. And even in my love and absorption with the beauty of the world, I sought to learn nothing that could be given back to humanity. I drank of the beauty of the world as a vampire drinks. I was satisfied. I was filled to the brim. But I was dead. And I was changeless" (321).

And so Louis has finally resolved his inner turmoil. He has given up his human conceptions of life, and fully adjusted to his new existence. However, Louis' gain is Armand's loss: his loss of human passion makes him as dead and changeless as Armand himself, and so he can no longer provide Armand with what he desires. Louis explains his change to Armand:

"I thought you were powerful and beautiful and without regret, and I wanted that desperately. But you were a destroyer just as I was a destroyer, more ruthless and

cunning even than I. You showed me the only thing that I could really hope to become, what depth of evil, what degree of coldness I would have to attain to end my pain. And I accepted that. And so that passion, that love you saw in me was extinguished” (336).

So Louis and Armand’s love finally ends in despair. Could author Rice have been suggesting that human relationships are just as fragile, just as likely to end in detachment and despair? Perhaps. More likely, she was saying that only immortality ends so tragically. Since eternal life and power can lead only to cold detachment, then only mortals can truly live, love, and feel. This being the case, we must capitalize on our limited lifetimes and live them to the fullest. “If God doesn’t exist,” says Louis, “this life ... every second of it ... is all we have” (236).

However, Rice realizes that humankind will always strive for immortality, even if it is shown to them to be ultimately undesirable. When Louis finishes his story, his interviewer begs Louis to make him into a vampire. “It didn’t have to end, not in this, not in despair!,” he protests. “I beg you ... give it all one more chance. One more chance in me!” His human sense of life convinces him that *he* will not fall prey to such despair. “I tell you and have told you,” says Louis, “that it could not have ended any other way” (339). Frustrated, he drains the interviewer to the point of death and leaves. As the novel ends, the interviewer is recovering, listening to the tapes of Louis’ story and looking for Lestat, who as it turns out was not killed by Claudia after all. He still wants the power, even after all he has been told. And that is perhaps the most powerful statement about human nature Rice could have made. Like Dostoevsky’s underground man, the interviewer is completely irrational, and therefore completely human. And so Louis, who began the novel as the ultimate example of a human caught in the throes of anguish, becomes at the end the ultimate example of what we can never be: certain of our own condition and fully

detached and removed from life. By showing that such a condition is fully undesirable, Rice tells us to live our lives to the fullest, embrace our anguish and our subjectivity, and, above all, *feel*.

Interview With the Vampire is fundamentally a novel about anguish, and as such it is inextricably linked with the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. Louis' search for meaning in his existence and attempt to avoid anguish closely parallels our own. Studying Sartre's writings can help us to better understand our condition, and using them to study Louis' condition can do so as well; however, these things will not lead to a perfect understanding of our absurd existence.

Ultimately, we are condemned – condemned to be free.

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