"The poor privilege of all": Suicide in *Varney the Vampire*

G. V. Geer

Abstract

Varney the Vampire offers valuable insights into the popular press's role in both reflecting and helping to shape the public's changing attitudes toward suicide during the Victorian period. *Varney* models a secularized and compassionate approach to the topic of suicide. It harshly critiques superstitious beliefs around suicide, as well as practices such as the staking and crossroads burial of the bodies of those who had killed themselves (both were legally sanctioned penalties for the crime of suicide until the mid-nineteenth century). Furthermore, *Varney* offers what it sees as an ideal clerical response to suicide or suicidality: one of compassionate care rather than condemnation and exclusion. *Varney* insists that readers approach the fraught topic of suicide with compassion for human (and vampire) suffering, with respect for individual agency and choice in death, and with disdain for fear-driven prejudice and persecution of suicidal individuals. Its legacy lives on, as subsequent vampire texts have continued to approach the topic of suicide and self-harm in the compassionate spirit of *Varney the Vampire*.

Keywords

vampire; *Varney the Vampire*; suicide; self-harm; Victorian; penny dreadful

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"The poor privilege of all": Suicide in *Varney the Vampire*

G. V. Geer

Varney the Vampire, or; The Feast of Blood (1845-1847) was among the most successful of the Victorian penny dreadfuls. It is also a foundational text in the genre of popular vampire fiction, and has been hugely influential in shaping the genre's approach to a number of topics, including the topic of suicide. In his chapter on "Vampire Suicide," Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock credits *Varney* with establishing "one of the more curious recurring tropes of vampire narrative: vampire suicide" (2019: 139). Weinstock identifies three categories of vampire suicide – remorse, ennui, and heroism – and three ideological functions of vampire suicide: "to bolster anthropocentrism, reaffirm conventional Judeo-Christian morality and undercut the appeal of immortality" (140). Varney, according to Weinstock, is the original remorseful suicidal vampire: overcome with regret for an existence he recognizes as evil, Varney kills himself, becoming a cautionary tale for readers. Discussing remorseful vampires, Weinstock writes: "when the vampire commits suicide, it reminds us that the vampire is a monster and nice people do not wish to be monsters" (149). Weinstock's reading casts the figure of the suicidal vampire as what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls, in his influential essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," a "monster of prohibition" which "polices the borders of the possible" in order "to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – *must* not – be crossed" (1996: 13). I suggest, however, that *Varney* (and vampire texts more generally) actually challenges the notion that a suicidal person/vampire is monstrous in this way, rather than leaning in to it. Weinstock's chapter is valuable in that it draws attention to vampire suicide as an understudied aspect of popular vampire literature, and his identification of these categories and functions is useful as an overview of the topic. However, there is much more to be said about the ways in which each text both reflects and affects attitudes toward suicide within its specific context.

I argue that suicide (and self-harm more broadly) is a main through-line of popular vampire literature, and that each iteration of this theme engages with the specific aspects of suicide and self-harm which are most salient to contemporary audiences. Accordingly, I argue that rather than attempting to make some universal point about suicide, *Varney* is responding to the specific discourse and legislation around suicide in 1840s England. I follow where Carol Senf, Nina Auerbach, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and others have led in considering "the relationship between this particular literary character [the vampire] and the social history that

influenced its creation" (Senf 1988:11). Cohen proposes "a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender," asserting that "the monstrous body is pure culture" (1996: 3, 4). Similarly, Auerbach writes that "vampires shape themselves to personal and national moods" with "alacrity" and, in turn, "every age embraces the vampire it needs" (1995: 5, 145). Building on Senf and Auerbach, who are primarily interested in themes such as sex, gender, and power, my consideration of *Varney* focuses on suicide and self-harm. Auerbach herself gestures towards the vampire's desire for death, noting that vampires "embody not fear of death, but fear of life . . . vampires long to die, at least in certain moods," but does not delve into the subject of vampire suicide in any depth (1995: 5). I pick up this thread to consider why nineteenth-century England needed, and so eagerly embraced, this self-harming, suicidal vampire.

Given *Varney*'s popularity among the general public both within and beyond England, it is an ideal (and almost entirely unexplored) example of the ways in which the popular press both reflected and helped to shape public perceptions of and attitudes toward suicide in the mid-1800s. I argue that, in a time when attitudes toward suicide were undergoing significant change and debate, *Varney* modeled a secularized and compassionate approach to the subject. Readers are encouraged to pity and sympathize with the suicidal Varney, and in the end to respect his choice to take his own life. This more rational and measured approach to suicide is directly contrasted with older, superstitious beliefs. The narrator is particularly scathing in his critique of the old burial practices surrounding the bodies of suicides. Crossroads burial, staking of corpses, and other related practices (all legally sanctioned penalties for suicide in England until the mid-nineteenth century)[1] are represented as the brutal and unjust actions of ignorant mobs, driven by superstition into perpetrating such evil acts. Additionally, I read *Varney* as rejecting the religious condemnation of suicides and making it clear that churchmen should respond to suicides and suicidal individuals with reason, prayer, and compassion; not with judgement or by barring them from consecrated ground.

Varney's popular and fantastic nature makes it an ideal place for discussions of such a fraught topic. As Barbara T. Gates observes in *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories*, during the Victorian period "[d]isplaced fears of suicide were relocated in the realm of fantasy" (1988: 101). Gates argues that the "subversive message" in *Varney* – that "when the burden of life becomes too heavy, it is acceptable to lay it down. If immortality means a continuation of mental or metaphysical suffering, suicide can be preferable" – is "made safe for Victorians because it occurs in tales whose characters seem far removed from nineteenth-century England" (102). The view that "overtly sensational works [such as penny dreadfuls] can reveal important social problems" is persuasively argued by those who study such texts (Senf 1988: 48). Indeed, a number of scholars have read *Varney* itself in this way[2]. Rebecca Nesvet writes that "criticism shows that *Varney* and other 1840s 'penny bloods' were far from escapist" (Nesvet 2022: 126). In Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Cohen recognizes that there is, perhaps, something particularly evocative about "[v]ampires, burial, death," introducing the first of his seven theses with a description of the treatment of the vampiric body – staked, beheaded, and buried at the crossroads – "that place that leads to many other places, that point of indecision" (1996: 4). He explains that "[t]he monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (4). It is in this sense that Varney is a monster: due to his liminal nature, trapped at the crossroads between life and death, Varney's body is at once the body of the suicidal individual and the

[1] See, for example, Halliday (2010), Harte (2011), Houston (2010), and Jalland (1996).

[2] See, amongst others, Hackenberg (2009), Cameron (2022), and Gasperini (2019).

corpse of the suicide. Encountering this monstrous body, *Varney*'s readers are encouraged to think deeply about the ongoing social, legal, and religious changes taking place around the topic of suicide; and are provided with a mentally and emotionally safe vantage point within the realm of fantasy from which to do so. This becomes the model for subsequent popular vampire fiction such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which of course is another foundational text of the genre. As I have argued elsewhere, *Dracula* responds to similar nineteenth-century concerns about suicide and self-harm, and is particularly attentive to the debates over suicide and euthanasia during this period.[3] We continue to see *Varney*'s influence in twentieth- and twenty-first century popular vampire texts' treatment of suicide, perhaps most notably in Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* (1976–2018) and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005–20).

Sympathy for the Suicidal Vampire

Varney the Vampire ends – after a run of nearly three years and over eight hundred pages – with news of Varney's suicide at Mount Vesuvius. The path that leads him to throw himself into that volcano is gradual, and one which readers walk along with him. In *Varney*'s earliest installments, Varney is presented as a monster, and then as a likable and somewhat comical villain. At a certain point though, he shifts into a deeply tragic figure who is tormented by his horrible immortal existence. It is important to note that, in these later sections, the text explicitly resists the characterization of Varney as purely evil or inhuman. Rather, Varney is portrayed as an intelligent man/vampire who has within him a "strange and fearful mixture of good and evil" ([1845-7] 1970: 770).[4] He goes through periods in which he resists drinking blood as long as possible, and tries to help his victims in some way to make up for the harm he does them. At other times (most notably after a failed suicide attempt) he embraces the destructive side of his nature and kills without compunction. There are a few suggestions in the text that perhaps Varney's vampiric existence came about because of some evil deed of his while he was still human. We are told that Varney himself theorizes that perhaps "this world was to him the place of perdition for crimes done in some other sphere" (770). Despite this, he holds on to hope that he may someday be redeemed, since surely God is merciful. The narrator holds this up as proof that "even yet there was a something akin to humanity lingering at his hear[t]", for despite being a vampire, "he had some yearnings after a better state" (770). In the final narrative arc, readers (and Varney) meet the clergyman Mr Bevan, whose utter faith in the possibility of even a vampire going to Heaven Varney finds deeply moving (845). Overwhelmingly, in this later part of the narrative, readers are urged to sympathize with Varney, and to hope for his eventual release from torment and, ultimately, his redemption.

For Varney, however, suicide is – for all intents and purposes – the only option if he wants to die. The chances that he could be killed through violence or an accident in such a way that he would not revive are vanishingly small. If his body is exposed to the light of the moon it regenerates and he comes back to life still as a vampire. He could, presumably, be buried for years and return to life when his grave is disturbed and his remains are once again exposed to moonlight. In order to truly die, his body must be completely destroyed with no chance that the remains would ever be exposed to the moonlight. This is not an easy thing to accomplish, even if those handling his remains were to know that it was necessary. Suicide is extremely difficult

[3] I make this argument in my doctoral thesis. For another perspective on euthanasia in Dracula, see Keridiana Chez (2012) "'You Can't Trust Wolves No More Nor Women': Canines, Women, and Deceptive Docility in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*."

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the 1970 Arno edition of *Varney the Vampire*.

for poor Varney, as his unsuccessful attempts to take his own life make clear. Readers are encouraged to feel for Varney as he confronts the horrible possibility that he is truly unable to die. His situation is terrible, and suicide comes to seem the only chance he has of finding relief from his suffering. On one occasion he cries out: "Oh! gracious Heaven, how long am I to suffer? . . . when, oh, when will my weary pilgrimage be over" (771). Previously he had asked: "How long is this hated life to last? . . . When shall I cease to be the loathsome creature I am?" (732). The narrator leaves no room for readers to doubt Varney's mental suffering, or to wonder what their own response to it ought to be. After expounding upon Varney's suffering, the narrator exclaims: "We pity thee, Varney!" (771). Readers understand themselves as included in that "we" and know that they are meant to pity poor Varney the Vampire.

The fear of being unable to die appears in *Varney* before the topic of suicide does. In an earlier installment, Varney has a dream in which he is entombed alive by a swarm of gibbering figures. As they bury him, one cries out: "Endow him with the rare gift of immortality, and then let him lie buried for thousands of years yet to come" (454). Varney recalls: "I called for aid, and asked for death; but still they proceeded to fill up the pit, while I lay, incapable of anything but agonized thought, at the bottom of it" (454). Although Varney is never actually buried alive, the feeling of being "incapable of anything but agonized thought" certainly comes to pass, highlighting a sense of being unable to escape from the mental torment he experiences – torment from which death seems to offer the only chance of escape.[5] The narrator remarks that death would be for Varney "a grateful release to him from intense suffering" (770), and Varney himself wishes that he could "shuffle it [his life] off as any ordinary men [sic] can do" (846). He desires both an end to his own suffering and an end to the suffering he is forced to inflict upon others through his vampiric nature.

Varney hints at suicide off and on for a while, before clearly committing to the suicide plotline in Chapter 171. The narrator takes a short break from the main narrative to reflect on Varney's vampiric existence, praising him for his eloquence, his "dignified courtesy and polished manners" (734). Then the narrator turns to the topic of suicide:

> At times, too, it would seem as if he regretted that fatal gift of immortality, as if he would gladly have been more human, and lived and died as those lived and died whom he saw around him. But being compelled to fulfill the order of his being, he never had the courage absolutely to take measures for his own destruction, a destruction which should be final in consequence of depriving himself of all opportunity of resuscitation.
>
> Certainly the ingenuity of such a man might have devised some means of putting such an end to his life, that, in the perishable fragment of his body there should linger not one spark of that vitality which had been so often again and again fanned into existence.
>
> Probably some effort of that kind may yet be his end, and we shall see that Varney the Vampyre will not, like the common run of the world's inhabitants, be changed into that dust of which is all humanity, but will undergo some violent disruption, and be for ever blotted out from the muster-roll of the living creatures that inhabit the great world.
>
> (734)

By this point the author must have already decided to (or at least was strongly considering) ending the series with Varney's death by suicide. This foreshadowing seems to have functioned as a way to warn the audience which way the wind was blowing, slowly acclimating them to the idea that Varney may kill himself, and leading them to accept that outcome as a satisfactory ending to his story.

[5] This dream might also perhaps be read as Varney dreading the ignominious burial suffered by *felos de se*: To be buried in a pit with a condemning crowd gathered around to watch (see below).

Once the idea of Varney's suicide is introduced, it shows up periodically throughout the narrative, mixed in with the aforementioned discussions of Varney's torment and his fear of not being able to die. Prompted by a dream, he begins to plan his first suicide attempt - or at least the first attempt that we can see. He later tells Mr Bevan that "More than once have I endeavoured to cast off this horrible existence," indicating he made previous attempts on his life to which the readers are not privy (845). He resolves to throw himself into the sea in the hopes that his body will end up in some deep cavern where the moonbeams cannot reach it (as mentioned above, the light of the moon can revive his corpse, and he will not be truly dead whilst enough of his body remains to be revived). He resolves that he "will no longer hesitate, but make this attempt to shake off the dreadful weight which mere existence is to me" (772). Varney carries through with his plan, but his suicide attempt is unsuccessful. He is washed ashore and revived, after which point his mental state takes a distinct turn for the worse. The narrator once again takes pains to stoke readers' pity for Varney, remarking that: "It was sad – very sad, indeed, that such a being could not die when he chose, the poor privilege of all" (806). This line exemplifies the prevailing attitude of *Varney* to the topic of suicide: it is not just that Varney the Vampire, as an exceptional case, should be able to "die when he chose." No; this is a privilege that ought to be shared by all - vampire or human, and to be denied this choice is a cause for sadness. I suggest that Weinstock's claim that Varney's suicide is meant to remind readers that "the vampire is a monster and nice people do not wish to be monsters" (2019: 149) does not ring true as Varney's effort to kill himself is not presented as divine punishment or as justice for his crimes or even as a crime in itself. Instead, the narrative depicts it as a perfectly reasonable response to a life of mental and sometimes physical anguish. We are sad to see Varney go in the end, but we understand why he chose that path. Readers are encouraged to respect Varney's choice to end his own life.

The Suicidal Vampire: A Clerical Response

Of particular interest is Varney's interaction with Mr Bevan, the clergyman with whom he stayed for a short time before embarking upon his final journey to Mount Vesuvius. The text holds up Mr Bevan as an example of how one should respond when confronted with a suicidal person (or vampire). The narrator speaks glowingly of Mr Bevan, who is both charismatic and a genuinely good man (praise which is juxtaposed with the narrator's cutting remarks about how rotten most clergymen are). He is kind and accepting of Varney, even knowing what he is. After all, if God chose to create vampires, who is he to question or condemn? In the course of their first conversation, which occurs after Varney has caused the death of at least two local people, Mr Bevan offers to be Varney's friend and invites him to stay in his home, where he can spend the night in safety. Varney, "deeply affected" by Mr Bevan's kindness, accepts the offer (845) and, in the course of the ensuing conversation, opens up to Mr Bevan about his despair and his previous suicide attempts. Mr Bevan is sympathetic, and suggests that perhaps Varney's unsuccessful attempts were not an accident, and that something good is accomplished by his being alive. Rejecting this suggestion, Varney asserts that the only thing accomplished by his being alive is his "most exquisite misery" (846). Mr Bevan tries to comfort him, saying "even that may pass away" (846), He asks Varney if he has tried prayer, saying: "If you will not pray yourself to Heaven, I will pray for you, and in time to come you will have some hope" (845). Varney appreciates Mr Bevan's kindness, but is still set on suicide, telling Mr Bevan: "when I have sought to rid the world of my own bad company, I have been moved to do so by some act of kindness and consideration, most contrary to my desserts" (847). There seems to be no way out of suicidal ideation for Varney: if he is treated poorly he despairs,

if he is treated kindly he is overwhelmed with remorse. Either way he feels that the only way for him to find peace is through suicide.

Later, when reading Varney's suicide note, Mr Bevan is for a time "prisoner to the most painful thoughts" (853). He had hoped to help Varney, but it now appears that all he had done was to give Varney a safe place to rest and plan his latest suicide attempt. Realizing that there is absolutely nothing he can do for Varney, he must wait for news and hope that Varney changes his mind. *Varney the Vampire* ends with a newspaper account of Varney's death, which we read along with Mr Bevan. Varney arranges for there to be a witness to his suicide, instructing the unwitting man to:

> "'say that you accompanied Varney the Vampyre to the crater of Mount Vesuvius, and that, tired and disgusted with a life of horror, he flung himself in to prevent the possibility of a reanimation of his remains.' Before then the guide could utter anything but a shriek, Varney took one tremendous leap, and disappeared into the burning mouth of the mountain. THE END."
>
> (868)

At the close of *Varney the Vampire*, Mr Bevan has done what many readers would have liked to do, which is to attempt to save Varney. But Varney has made up his own mind, and in the end he was able to "die when he chose" (806). The readers are left alone with Mr Bevan, reading of Varney's death and grieving his loss but respecting his choice.

Mr Bevan is a particularly important character when considered in the light of the burial of *felos de se*. Suicide was a felony in England up until 1961, and to be judged *felo de se* (felon against oneself) by a coroner's jury meant that one had knowingly and deliberately committed the crime of self-murder (MacDonald and Murphy 1990: 351). Those considered not to have been in their right minds when they killed themselves were judged *non compos mentis*, and were subject to milder penalties (114). Penalties for *felo de se* included forfeiture of the deceased's goods and profane burial of their corpse in unconsecrated ground. In *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England,* Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy describe how such a profane burial might have looked: "The night following the inquest, officials of the parish, the churchwardens and their helpers, carried the corpse to a crossroads and threw it naked into a pit. A wooden stake was hammered through the body, pinioning it in the grave, and the hole was filled in. No prayers for the dead were repeated; the minister did not attend" (1990: 15). If we consider Varney as a *felo de se* (he did, after all, actually kill himself at least once, before being revived by the light of the moon - much to his dismay and disappointment) then Mr Bevan's treatment of him becomes even more significant. The grave of a *felo de se* was not intended as a place of rest (as were the graves of faithful Christians), but one of confinement, punishment, and warning. Whilst these rules gradually shifted and relaxed throughout the 1800s,[6] a clergyman could find himself in trouble if he violated these practices around the burial of a *felo de se* by providing (depending on the exact year and the particular circumstances) burial in consecrated ground, prayers, and other religious rites to a person judged to be *felo de se*.

The narrator of *Varney* has little patience with this attitude on the part of religious men and institutions and Mr Bevan is presented as something special, with the narrator remarking that: "We should have less of opposition to churchmen, if they were all like Mr B[e]van, and

[6] This was a gradual process. For instance, in 1823, 'An Act to Alter and Amend the Law relating to the Interment of the Remains of any Person Found Felo de Se' prohibited staking and crossroads burials and authorized the burial of *felos de se* in consecrated ground, while specifically including the caveat that: "nothing herein contained shall authorize the performing of any of the Rites of Christian Burial on the Interment of the Remains of any such Person as aforesaid".

not the wily, ravenous, illiberal, grasping crew they really are" (848). What the narrator sees as praiseworthy in him, the church would not: we are told that "if the bishop of his diocese had known one half of what Mr Bevan thought, he would not have suffered him to remain in his religious situation" (846). He is full of "liberal opinions" which for the most part he "kept . . . to himself, although he always acted upon them, and a man more completely free from sectarian dogmas, and illiberal fancies of superstition, which are nicknamed faith, could not be" (846). As we will see presently, the narrator has a great disdain for those swept away by superstitious fancies, making this high praise indeed. Mr Bevan, then, is an example of a clergyman as the narrator feels clergymen should be, rather than as they are. He is an idealized figure, whose actions are worth paying close attention to.

I contend that the vampires – Varney and Clara (a young woman who Varney turned into a vampire) – as interacted with by Mr Bevan, are stand-ins for *felos de se*. Here, the displacement that Barbara T. Gates writes of becomes especially apparent: the narrator's controversial stance on the proper behavior of clergymen toward suicides (potential or actual) is "made safe" for audiences by displacing the issue onto the figure of the vampire (Gates 1988: 102). Doing so provides a safe distance within which the reader can view and consider the issue more calmly, in a fantasy context that feels inherently less fraught and threatening than the real world. Mr Bevan, presented as an exemplary churchman, treats the suicidal person with a compassion that is free from religious judgement. We are told that "one of the sublimest precepts of the whole Scriptures was to him that which says, 'Judge not, lest ye, too, should be judged'" ([1845-7] 1970: 847). This is key, since this attitude, and his "liberal opinions" steers Mr Bevan away from the inherently judgmental practices surrounding the treatment of the corpses of vampires / *felos de se*.[7]

It is clear that Mr Bevan believes in the respectful treatment of the remains of vampires / *felos de se*. When Clara Crofton's family goes to open her coffin in order to ascertain if she is a vampire, Mr Bevan urges them in vain to "Disturb not the dead, and let them rest in peace" (836) and, later, is appalled to learn of the mob's staking and burial of Clara's body in the crossroads, calling it "an outrage" (844). Hearing that Varney has respectfully filled in the grave so that Clara may "now rest in peace," Mr Bevan replies: "I thank God that the body is so disposed of" (846). This aligns with contemporary approaches as these particular practices had already been outlawed for a number of years by the time *Varney* was published. To get at what were perhaps the more controversial aspects of the narrator's stance, we must look even more closely at the implications of Mr Bevan's interactions with Varney. Most importantly, Mr Bevan gives Varney a safe place to rest within the auspices of the church: he offers Varney "asylum in my house" and assures him that no one else will know he is there, so he will not be disturbed (845). This has the feel of an illicit secret burial, one carried out at night in order to protect the vampire's body from those who would disturb its rest. The text does not indicate if this is actually consecrated ground as we are only told that it is "the parsonage house" where Mr Bevan lives (846). Nevertheless, it is a place closely associated with the church, and one in which the clergyman would frequently be present. As such, it is a central part of the town's religious life, not a peripheral space at the parish boundary or an out-of-the way field or highway. Varney is deeply moved by Mr Bevan's invitation, saying: "I did not fancy that there existed a spot on earth on which I could lie down in peace, and yet it may be here" (846). Varney's remark accurately captures the expectation that a person committing suicide may have had for their body (presuming they were ever in a state of mind in which they could consider such a thing), or the expectations that the family and friends of a

[7] Lyndsay Galpin discusses the functioning of "suicide verdicts as moral character judgements" in *Male Suicide and Masculinity in 19th-century Britain: Stories of Self-Destruction* (2022:94). See also Victor Bailey (1998) and Olive Anderson (1987).

felo de se may have had. People struggled to convince the legal and religious authorities (coroner's jury, vicar general, etc.) that their loved one deserved a place in which they could "lie down in peace" (846). Sometimes they were successful, but for a convicted *felo de se* it was usually a forlorn hope (Seaver 2004). This is why Mr Bevan's offer of a "refuge"; a place "where you will be safe, and I hope more happy" seems so miraculous to Varney (846). He assures the anxious vampire that: "you are safe here; it shall be my life for your life if any harm should be attempted to be done to you" and replies in the affirmative when Varney asks if he will keep to his word, having "promised me rest" (847). Whilst on a literal level in the narrative, Mr Bevan provides a temporary safe place for Varney to rest and recover from his exhaustion, I contend that, on a metaphorical level, he provides a safe, secret, Christian place for a *felo de se* to rest, safe from fear and violence.

If the offer of a safe place to rest is controversial, so too is Mr Bevan's offer to pray for the vampire / *felo de se*. Remember, according to the 1823 Act, prayers were not supposed to be offered on such occasions. Nevertheless, soon after meeting Varney, and mere moments after Varney tells him that he has attempted to kill himself on multiple occasions, Mr Bevan's thoughts turn to prayer. Specifically, prayer for the grief-stricken, suicidal vampire standing next to him. He says to Varney:

> "Do not leave me. Ask yourself if there is anything that I can do to alleviate your destiny. Have you tried prayer?"
>
> "Prayer?"
>
> "Yes. Oh! There is great virtue in prayer."
>
> "I pray? What for should I pray but for that death which whenever it seems to be in my grasp has then flitted from me in mockery, leaving me still a stranded wretch upon the shores of this world."
>
> (845)

Mr Bevan hastens to assure Varney that, "I will be your friend" and "If you will not pray yourself to Heaven, I will pray for you, and in time to come you will have some hope. Oh, believe me, earnest prayer is not in vain" (845). There are several interesting things to unpack here. Firstly, praying for a vampire and a suicide is undoubtably another case of Mr Bevan acting on those "liberal opinions" of his. He offers Varney a place to rest, and then, on the way there, offers to pray for him. Mr Bevan is thus praying for a suicide on the way to his resting place (symbolizing his burial) within the auspices of the church.

Secondly, since Varney is currently standing in for both a living suicidal person and – metaphorically (or perhaps literally, given the undeadness of the vampire) – the body of a person who has already committed suicide, Mr Bevan's remark about how to "alleviate [his] destiny" has a double meaning. On the surface, this is about Mr Bevan trying to dissuade Varney from continuing to try to kill himself, and encouraging him to hope for a different kind of redemption and the alleviation of his suffering. In this case the "destiny" is either suicide or eternal life as a vampire. Metaphorically, with Varney already being a suicide, this "destiny" could be eternal punishment in hell: generally held to be the fate of a suicide. The issue, of course, is that suicide was viewed as a mortal sin, and in the vast majority of cases, due to the nature of the sin, there would be no time for the person to repent of their sin and pray for forgiveness before death. Mr Bevan's declaration that: "If you will not pray yourself to Heaven, I will pray for you" is therefore key (845). If Varney, as a suicide, will not (or cannot) pray for himself, Mr Bevan will pray for him. This not only implies that it is morally defensible to pray for suicides, but also that such prayers may be effective. This prayer, Mr Bevan assures Varney, means that "in time to come you will have some hope." Prayer "is not in vain" even in cases such as this and so, perhaps, the vampire / *felo de se*'s doom is not in fact eternal. Through his

treatment of both Clara and Varney, Mr Bevan demonstrates that instead of denying the hope of heaven and eternal rest to vampires and suicides, churchmen should offer it to them with an open heart and an open mind.

Vampires and Suicides at the Crossroads: Against Profane Burial

Throughout *Varney*, and long before we meet Mr Bevan, the narrator is firmly opposed to the brutal acts of crossroads burial and the staking of corpses, casting them as a result of the superstitious panic of the uneducated masses, and speaking of them with scorn and sadness in equal measure. Right from the beginning, *Varney* draws upon folkloric understandings of vampires, in which there has long been a conceptual link between vampires and suicides (Senf 1988: 47). As Twitchell notes, suicides were among the categories of corpses considered most likely to rise as a vampire (1981: 8-9). Burial practices surrounding such "dangerous dead" frequently involved apotropaic practices intended to keep these suspect corpses in their graves; for instance, burying the corpse at a crossroads; and placing sharp objects such as sickles, thorns, knives, nails, needles, skewers, or sharpened stakes in the grave or driving them into the corpse to keep it from rising or to impale it if it attempted to rise (Barber 1988: 55). Without such precautions, it was believed that the body of a suicide may rise as a vampire and prey on the living, particularly family members.[8] The connection between vampires and suicides is first made in the early installments of *Varney* when, attempting to make sense of the attack on Flora Bannerworth (a beautiful young woman from an impoverished noble family), Henry Bannerworth (Flora's brother) asks: "Is it at all within the compass of the wildest belief that what we have seen is a vampyre, and no other than my ancestor who, a hundred years ago, committed suicide?" (*Varney the Vampire* [1845-7] 1970).[9] Upon inspection, this ancestor's coffin turns out to be empty, which further convinces most of the men that they are in fact dealing with a vampire. However, Dr Chillingworth (a medical doctor and friend of the Bannerworths) remains unconvinced, and his continued insistence that they consider "rational" and "scientific" explanations, as well as his assurance that there are no "secrets of the tomb" apart from the "not over pleasant odour" of decomposition, ensures that neither readers nor the Bannerworths and their allies are allowed to entirely succumb to a superstitious belief in vampires (38, 34). The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of the mobs of superstitious townsfolk and, as a result, not all vampire hunts in *Varney* end in an empty coffin: some end with the staking, burning, and/or crossroads burial of the supposed vampire, who – if not a corpse at the beginning of the process – assuredly is by the end of it.

As previously discussed, staking and crossroads burial were among the legal penalties for the crime of *felo de se*. Over the course of the nineteenth century these penalties were

[8] See McClelland (2006) and Barber (1988).

[9] There are some continuity issues surrounding the Bannerworth ancestor suspected of being a vampire. Early in the narrative, he is identified as Sir Runnagate Bannerworth, an unsavory character who died about ninety years previously (10). Shortly after, though, he is said to be Marmaduke Bannerworth, an ancestor who committed suicide about a hundred years ago and whose coffin turns out to be empty (24, 36). There is also another, more recently deceased, Marmaduke Bannerworth who (depending on which part of the text one refers to) may or may not have killed himself in a moment of insanity brought on by intense guilt exacerbated by overconsumption of wine (26, 259, 367, 389). The suicide of this later Marmaduke, however, is portrayed as much more a matter of sympathy than of supernatural terror to the living Bannerworths, likely because he was their father and husband rather than an ancestor from the more distant past.

gradually abolished. By the time *Varney* was being written and published in serial form between 1845 and 1847, crossroads burial and the staking of *felos de se* had been illegal for nearly twenty-five years, since the 1823 "Act to alter and amend the Law relating to the Interment of the Remains of any Person found *Felo de se.*" Thus, their portrayal in *Varney* as frightening remnants of an ignorant and superstitious past make perfect sense. When the mob is digging the hole at the crossroads in which to bury Clara Crofton's body, the narrator tells us that it was "a purpose which had never yet been attempted within the memory of any of the inhabitants of the place" (843). This would also have been the case for much of *Varney*'s audience at the time: anyone under the age of about thirty would either have been born after the practice had been outlawed, or have been very young when such things had taken place, and would therefore be unlikely to remember much even if they had witnessed such a burial. In the years leading up to the 1823 law these practices had been on the wane for some time, so even for the older generations these types of burials were not terribly common. As a result, it is probable that the proportion of *Varney*'s audience who had actually witnessed crossroads burials and the staking of *felos de se* was relatively small. Indeed, the individuals in *Varney* who suggest staking and/or crossroads burial are either elderly or outsiders of some kind. When, for instance, a mob discovers the body of a supposed vampire during the Bannerworth section of the narrative, there is "an old woman" in the crowd who is most knowledgeable about vampires and what to do with their corpses (338). She urges the mob to: "run a stake through his body, and then place him upon some dry wood, . . . and then burn him to a cinder" (338). The mob follows her instructions, and then also apprehends and kills a poor traveler who just happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The old woman once again urges them repeatedly to "run a stake through his body" to ensure that the 'vampire' could not rise and do more harm (339, 340). This is a practice more familiar to the elderly than the young; it was a product of an older and more violent time.

The narrator makes it perfectly clear how *Varney*'s audience ought to respond to staking and other related treatment of the corpses of supposed vampires, providing gruesome details of what the narrator calls the "sickening and horrible spectacle[s];" the "frightful and inhuman deed[s]" (220). In the aforementioned example, the narrator calls the actions of the mob "stupid" and "senseless" acts of "cruelty and wickedness" (338, 339). It was the "demon of superstition" that drove them to violence (339). In one case even the soldiers who witnessed the aftermath of a mob's actions – accustomed though they were to scenes of violence – were "actually sickened at the sight which the mutilated corpse presented, and turned aside with horror" (221). The accompanying illustration shows a coffin set up upon two sawhorses, with a large stake transfixing the body of the coffin's unfortunate occupant. The stake has been driven in with such force that the tip emerges from the bottom of the coffin, dripping blood onto the floor. The mallet that was used to accomplish this dreadful deed lies abandoned next to the coffin. Three appalled-looking soldiers stand in the doorway, having clearly just burst in upon the scene. The narrator laments that, even in a civilized country where people are reasonably well-educated, these kinds of things can still happen (204).

Perhaps the most moving of such scenes are those revolving around Clara's crossroads burial and staking. Before her death, Clara was an innocent young woman, about to be married, and the men can barely bring themselves to thrust the stake through her body. They do so nonetheless, vigorously enough that the stake goes all the way through her body and out the back of her coffin. They flee in terror as the corpse shrieks in pain (843). It then falls silent, truly dead this time: "There lay the dead, alone, in that awful grave, dabbled in blood, and the victim of the horrible experiment that had been instituted to lay a vampire" (844). The rain falls on her as she lies there, and the narrator says: "Oh, surely, pitying Heaven sent those drops to wash out the remembrance of such a deed" (844). Heaven itself is shown to disapprove of this

treatment of Clara's remains, vampire though she was. Varney finds her like this and grieves for her, calling out to her as: "Clara Crofton, thou victim!" (844). We too, as readers, are meant to see her as a victim. The narrator clearly encourages a negative view of these scenes of staking, burning, and burial at a crossroad. They are a disgusting, horrible, and shameful holdover from a superstitious past – one that must be firmly repudiated and finally put to rest.

Understanding the Suicidal Vampire

In a sad parallel to the work of the coroner's juries in cases of suspected *felo de se*, characters in *Varney* interrogate a suspected vampire's life, death, and afterlife in order to determine whether the individual is in fact a vampire. Their corpse is examined, and the circumstances of their last days and moments are dissected for hidden meaning; all under the eyes of the judging public. If it is decided that they are in fact a vampire, their corpse is subjected to violence and disrespect. In *Varney*, this is a tragedy: vampire or not (suicide or not), the bodies thus treated are pitiable victims of forces beyond their control. Such individuals, the text maintains, should be properly buried and allowed to "rest in peace" (844).

Historically, this interrogation of the body of the suicide was a search for answers performed in large part out of a desire to determine what led an individual to commit suicide. How did they come to be this terrible thing – this *felo de se*? During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, public opinion overall was shifting toward a more tolerant – or at least a more sympathetic – attitude toward those who committed suicide, particularly those afflicted with mental or physical impairment or pain. Rather than viewing suicide as a sin, or as an act to which people were driven by the promptings of the devil (a view that had long enjoyed widespread acceptance), people increasingly began to realize that there were definite psychological, social, and structural reasons why individuals committed suicide. In the late 1700s, suicide came to be seen by many as an "illness strategy" (Wright and Weaver 2009: 12) or as "a regrettable but explicable way out" for "those for whom life was a burden" and "for those who could not cope because of mental impairment" (Kelly 2013: 119). MacDonald and Murphy note that, at the same time, philosophical discussions of suicide increasingly argued for the possibility of rational suicide, drawing on positively regarded classical examples. Furthermore, the public grew accustomed to reading about suicide in the popular press, and as a result "more and more of the public concluded that the legitimacy of suicide was an arguable question," rather than condemning it out of hand as a sin or a crime (MacDonald and Murphy 1990: 172). There was no single answer to the question of why someone would kill themselves. Rather, there was a tangled web of speculation and uncertainty; of grief, condemnation, and pity; of a desire to understand, and a wish to prevent others from joining the numbers of the suicides. In a parallel to the question of how one might come to be a *felo de se*, *Varney the Vampire* asks: How did Varney come to be this terrible thing – this vampire? The text's attempts to answer the question range just as widely – and proceed down many of the same avenues – as contemporary attempts to explain and prevent suicide.

The question of what exactly Varney is and how exactly he came to be that way is a complicated one. This is in part due to the serial nature of *Varney*, which allowed the author[10]

[10] The authorship of *Varney* has been a matter of some debate, with the text having most commonly been attributed to either Thomas Peckett Prest or James Malcolm Rymer. Both of these authors are known to have authored numerous popular "bloods" besides *Varney*. In the Introduction to the 1972 Dover Edition of *Varney*, E. F. Bleiler writes that: "It is embarrassing to write an introduction to a book that is universally known as a landmark in its field, yet is so little studied that its authorship is disputable and its publishing history obscure." He notes that "the majority opinion at the moment assigns it to

to try out different plots and explanations (or to just forget what he had written on the subject many months and hundreds of pages ago). Even just during the first narrative arc with the Bannerworth family, the text runs through several possible explanations. The opening chapters of *Varney* quite clearly depict Varney as a vampire: as an inhuman monster with sharp fangs, claw-like fingernails, and eerily glowing eyes; attacking and sucking the blood of the innocent young Flora Bannerworth (2-4). Soon though, it begins to seem as though Varney is just pretending to be a vampire in order to frighten the Bannerworths into abandoning their home and the hidden treasure stashed somewhere within its walls. Or perhaps Varney is suffering from some kind of delusion under which he genuinely believes himself to be a vampire, although he is nothing more than a human (391). We then learn that years ago he had been hanged as a criminal, before being brought back to life (in a rather Frankenstein-esque way) as part of a scientific experiment performed by Dr Chillingworth (who is now a friend of the Bannerworths).[11] Whether he would have revived anyway since he actually was a vampire is not revealed: the possibility is explicitly left open. Later, Varney claims that he became a vampire after committing murder (possibly killing his son). On another occasion we witness the rising of a new vampire, and are told that some people become vampires based on sins they committed in life (753-754). Alternatively, back in the Bannerworth section, Varney assures a worried Flora that a person must be bitten many times and then killed as a result of being bitten before they are in any danger of becoming a vampire (157-8). In offering alternative explanations, *Varney* captures the uncertainty and the desire for answers in those caught amidst the roiling waters of the "tides of change in attitudes to suicide" during the nineteenth century (MacDonald and Murphy 1990: 9). Audiences' fears and uncertainties about suicide are displaced onto the figure of the vampire, and most explicitly onto Varney the Vampire himself.

Conclusion: *Varney*'s Legacy

The importance of *Varney*'s contribution to the trope of suicide in vampire literature can hardly be overstated. *Dracula* and *The Blood of the Vampire* (both published in 1897) carried this trope into the end of the nineteenth century. Since then, it has never died out (much like the vampires themselves). To this day, suicide remains an extremely prevalent theme in vampire texts (books, films, tv shows, etc.); one that deserves far more attention than it has thus far been afforded by scholars and critics. In the tradition of *Varney the Vampire*, vampire texts in recent decades overwhelmingly do not approach the topic of suicide with an attitude of outright judgment and condemnation. Rather, they exhibit a fascination with the philosophical, spiritual, and psychological aspects of suicide and suicidal ideation. By and large, they approach the topic of suicide in the spirit of *Varney the Vampire*: with compassion for human (and vampire) suffering, respect for individual agency and choice in death, and disdain for fear-driven prejudice and persecution of suicidal individuals. This is the legacy of *Varney the Vampire*.

Thomas Peckett Prest," but then goes on to argue that, "If one of these two men wrote *Varney the Vampire*, it was not Prest but Rymer" (1972: v, viii-ix). Likewise, in her work to "disentangle the output of Prest and Rymer" Helen R. Smith (2002) decisively identifies Rymer as the author of *Varney the Vampire.*

[11]See Chapter 77 of *Varney*.

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