

A Vampiric Revenant at the Cape (1834)

Damian Shaw, University of Macau

Makanna, or the Land of the Savage, published anonymously in 1834, was hailed as the first novel in English to be set in Africa.¹ This largely forgotten Romantic-era text has recently come to critical attention owing to its place in African colonial literature, yet its gothic elements have been overlooked. Though the gothic features of the text are secondary to the romance plot, the novel does, however, introduce a vampire worthy of note as it is an early literary example of a non-aristocratic vampire. The novel also fashions a connection between the vampire and psychology, and the vampire as a metaphor for greed, a metaphor which was to gain in force over the rest of the nineteenth century.

In the second volume of this three-volume novel, the hero, Paul Laroon, sets out to meet the prophet Makanna in order to enlist his help in his campaign against the British. Laroon is a French Creole, an agent of the French government charged with destabilizing British colonial power globally. Makanna is based on an actual historical character who has come to be seen as the prototype of Nelson Mandela and the first freedom fighter in Southern Africa after his attack on the British forces stationed in Grahamstown in 1819.² Laroon is nervous about his meeting with Makanna, but also deeply anxious about the welfare of his beloved, Bertha Falkland, who has been kidnapped. On his solitary journey into the interior, Laroon falls into an exhausted slumber in which he dreams himself aboard his old ship, the *Ganges*, witnessing a scene as if through the eyes of an 'ancient portrait' (Vol. 2: 153) on the wall. Rather than an ocean outside, however, there is a 'sapless forest' which seems to oppress his beloved Bertha with its 'unwholesome, dead, and mildewed branches' (Vol. 2: 154). At this point, the dreamer witnesses an attack on Bertha: