

Villa Diodati, the night that changed literature

It was a rainy night, more than 200 years ago— June the 16th, 1816, to be exact. But it wasn't warm, humid summer rain, no, it was as dark and cold as the winter downpours that lulled excited children to bed before Christmas and froze those too wretched to afford a house to return to. On that night, as spouses cuddled in bed with the children to stay warm and whispered poems of love to each other, five friends were sitting by the fireplace in Villa Diodati, Cologny, Switzerland. They were two couples of clandestine lovers isolated from their homelands and misunderstood by the world: Percy Bysshe Shelley with Mary Wollstonecraft, Clair Clairmont with Lord Byron, and the last's medic John Polidori. They were reading a book, a German gothic anthology named *Fantasmagoriana*. The rainy night blurred the line between reality and dream as ghosts, vampires and witches woke from their graves one last time to inhabit the fantasies of the five friends, and at one point Lord Byron had an idea. Each of them were going to write a horror story to read the following nights.

That competition was only took part in by Wollstonecraft, Polidori and Byron, but it shaped the genre as we know it today. Mary wrote the first version of her masterpiece *Frankenstein*, while the doctor gave life to prose's first vampire, Lord Ruthven, in *The Vampyre* (which drew inspiration from a fragmentary novel by Byron and was later attributed to him). The Lord's story, *Fragment of a Novel*, was left unfinished and later published as a postscript to his 1819 narrative poem *Mazeppa*.

In the finished version of *The Vampyre*, John Polidori included an interesting anecdote about Percy Bysshe Shelley and the night of June the 16th:

It appears that one evening Lord B., Mr. P. B. Shelly, the two ladies and the gentleman before alluded to, after having perused a German work, which was entitled Phantasmagoriana, began relating ghost stories; when his lordship having recited the beginning of Christabel, then unpublished, the whole took so strong a hold of Mr. Shelly's mind, that he suddenly started up and ran out of the room. The physician and Lord Byron followed, and discovered him leaning against a mantle-piece, with cold drops of perspiration trickling down his face. After having given him something to refresh him, upon enquiring into the cause of his alarm, they found that his wild imagination having pictured to him the bosom of one of the ladies with eyes (which was reported of a lady in the neighbourhood where he lived) he was obliged to leave the room in order to destroy the impression.

Unfortunately we are not sure about the accuracy of this story, but we can be mostly certain that the competition truly did originate on that night in Villa Diodati. In fact, not only Polidori recalls it in *The Vampyre*, right after the aforementioned anecdote, but Mary Shelley also mentions it in the preface to *Frankenstein*.

It is also worth mentioning that, while we have been referring to the mansion as "Villa Diodati", this name was actually given to it by Lord Byron, who had rented the house to spend the summer in, from the name of the family who owned it at the time— Diodati. The villa was actually called Belle Rive and it still exists to this day in Chemin de Ruth, by Lake Lemanoed. Unfortunately it is not open to visitors, but it can be gazed upon from the outside.