

myths and attempting to invent newer, more personal ones. Rice has lasted beyond the '70s, according to Ramsland, because she's talking about more than free love and self-knowledge. As Rice herself asserts with sympathetic vigor, "The Big Questions are absolutely vital. We have a nation of people on anti-depressants. People really want their lives to be meaningful."

While it's treacherous to summarize the philosophy in Rice's books — "I do not think in a line," she told me with a smile and no apology — it is possible to talk about the three large areas into which her speculations take her: good and evil; the individual's quest to know his or her own nature (which involves free will, something Rice talks about obsessively); and the world of spirits. In *Interview With the Vampire* — influenced by Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan* — the main character, Louis, agonizes over what it means to be a vampire, and whether he is by his very nature irredeemably evil, damned. Many Rice fans love this book best because the theological conundrums are condensed into the suffering figure of Louis and are therefore localized and accessible. But *Interview* is her simplest book, because Louis is off the hook as soon as he lets go of the idea that he is evil; his quest for self-knowledge is tied up completely in a redefinition of good and evil.

As Rice's work evolves, her characters move beyond the accepted religious notions of good and evil — Rice purging her Catholicism — to social, historical and cosmic goods and evils, problems too immense to be contained by one character. There is always that moment in her books when, like Louis, her protagonists see themselves as damned or irrevocably outcast and they despair. When Tonio Treschi is castrated in *Cry to Heaven*, he wants to die; in *Feast of All Saints*, when Marcel Ste. Marie realizes the world regards him as black (he thinks blacks are inferior), he wants to leave New Orleans. But after *Interview*, Rice's characters also get more optimistic and aggressive; instead of brooding, they ask what their new condition can give them, what it will teach them that they didn't know before. Lestat de Lioncourt, the 18th-century French aristocrat turned vampire who fangs Louis (a Louisiana planter) because he needs an income and a house in the country, positively overflows with joie de vivre; he doesn't give a damn if he's damned in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Fan clubs have formed around Lestat; adults phone Rice to ask where they can get in touch with him; people wear T-shirts claiming "Lestat killed Laura Palmer." He won't be bound by rules of behavior or community and, though he makes some heartless mistakes (turning his best friend into a vampire) and gross errors in judgment (unleashing Akasha, the queen of the damned, on an unsuspecting planet), he is Rice's most exuberant, sassy and radical thirster for blood and self-knowledge.

It's standard when discussing Rice's career to talk about her three voices or writing personas: Anne Rice, Anne Rampling (her "contemporary, soft-core" self) and A.N. Roquelaure (her "hardcore" self). Rice has explained her need to try out these different voices and integrate them into the voice of "Rice," but her pseudonymously written books are perfectly consistent with her philosophy and themes. The S&M *Sleeping Beauty* series, for instance, is very exciting, and also Rice's purest statement of the extreme conditions under which someone comes to know their own nature — pure, because it is uncluttered with worries about good or evil. "Sex is good," says Rice unequivocally. "I think the sexual revolution is the greatest revolution of our time. We must free sex from superstition. People have a psychological right to enjoy sex — relationships have to do with psychology and ethics, not religion and superstition. The more we move toward that, the better we are."

In *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*, Beauty is an untouched 15-year-old who has slumbered in a spell for 100 years. In the fairy tale, the handsome prince wakes her with a kiss and they live happily ever after. In Rice's version, the prince fucks her while she's asleep and takes her to his mother's castle as a "tribute," a noble-born slave who spends night and day naked in the service of other nobles who have a penchant for leather and discipline. Passed from harsh master to harsher master, Beauty gradually lets go of her preconceptions, her con-

ventional morality, her ego, and discovers, in almost Buddhist fashion, the freedom that comes from the total annihilation of the self. It changes her (to say the least), and when she finally returns to her kingdom, she is unwilling to marry just any old prince with his boring offers of matrimony and the missionary position. Now she needs one with imagination, courage and openness — and finally he comes, a prince whom Beauty met while they both served their apprenticeships, a sexual and emotional equal who also found wisdom at the end of a whip.

Splitting Rice's erotic writing off from her other work implies that pornography is embarrassing or marginal to her "serious" novels. (Her publisher, Knopf, wouldn't take the *Beauty* manuscripts, so E.P. Dutton published them.) I think the opposite is true: eroticism is central to her world view and the way her stories succeed. Readers of Rice agree that one of the major attractions of her work is its rampant, magnetic, polymorphous eroticism, although they don't quite know how to talk about novels as powerfully erotic as *The Vampire*

*Chronicles* in which no one actually has anything resembling genital sex. (I love the scene where Louis first climbs into the coffin with Lestat. Very hot.) One fan at *Change of Hobbit*, trying to pinpoint the genre in which Rice writes, settled on "erotica-based fantasy." Somebody else suggested "a genre of the senses."

What seems to be hanging people up here, both critics and readers, is their definition of eroticism. Some obviously think sex is sordid and subliterary — we won't mention all the giants who wrote what has been considered pornography, from Sappho to D.H. Lawrence — and others assume that eroticism means simply "naked bodies having sex." But while at one level the erotic brings people together for physical and spiritual pleasure, at another it is the force that makes cells multiply, trees grow, the planets spin. All Rice's novels are erotic in the sense that they are about living; making choices; finding a community of equals; wrestling meaning from chaos, disorder and despair. This is one reason why, although Rice's ideas about free will are similar to the existentialist's, I don't think of her as one. The existentialists I've read are grim even when they're choosing life, and they have a horror of the physical. (Name one decent sex scene in Sartre. It's all dirty sheets and shame.) Rice is an unabashed sensualist and cockeyed optimist: she believes everybody can love and be loved, and everybody can change and be saved.

"I think the dominant themes of the 20th century are salvation and reinvention, on so many levels. People who cannot work within the framework of their family or the small town in which they were born or a very conservative religious background, have been able in America to leave that and go somewhere else and reinvent themselves to feel like they are good people. I believe you can reinvent

yourself as a highly moral person, that you can aim for sanctity and goodness in the way you treat others. We are seeing the breakdown of revealed religion in the 20th century, so people are seeking salvation in other ways: they save their souls here on Earth, because we don't know what saving your soul anywhere else really means."



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I'm waiting for Anne Rice in the lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills, watching somebody change a 10-foot-tall floral arrangement, when the novelist comes shooting out of the dining room. Almost before I can turn on my tape recorder, she wants to revise something she said in New Orleans. We had talked about her third vampire novel, *The Queen of the Damned*, and I had said I thought Rice was moving away from her obsession with good and evil toward a new topic, masculine and feminine, and that she equated good with women and evil with men. (In the novel, an ancient Egyptian queen turned vampire, Akasha, decides to rid the world of nine out of ten men in order to cure it of war and other unpleasantness. Rice says it's a bad idea but also thinks it would work.) "The novel is not about masculine and feminine," Rice says now, leaning her elbow on the marbled table-top. "It's about the difference between religion and a wisdom that's connected to the lessons of the flesh. All