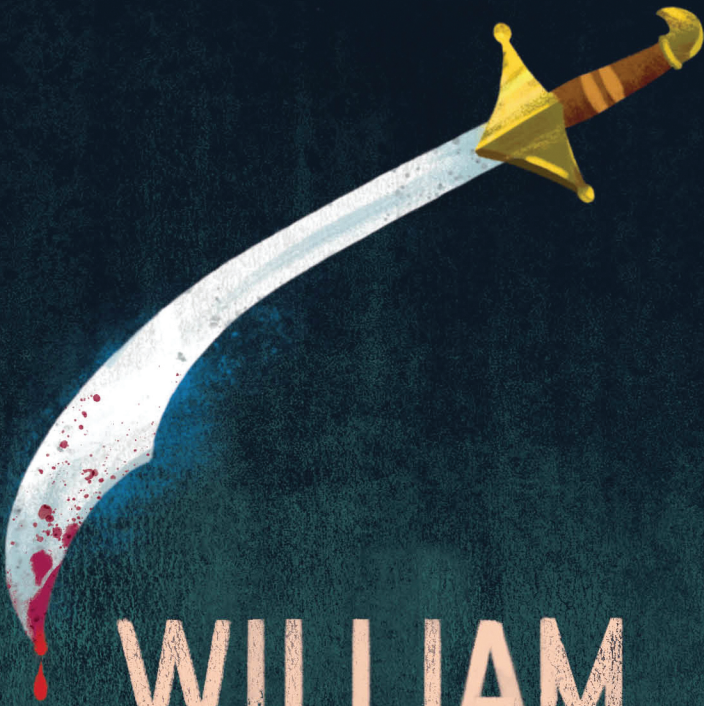


VATHEK



WILLIAM
BECKFORD

INTRODUCTION BY JOE R. LANSDALE

THE HORROR WRITERS ASSOCIATION *presents*
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SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM USE

1. *Vathek* is a unique novel in that there is no hero or heroine. The protagonist caliph is villainous, as are the antagonists that counter him. Readers are at a loss for a likeable character to empathize with or to “root for.” In what other ways does author William Beckford instead draw in the reader to keep them vested throughout this story?
2. Vathek’s insatiability for knowledge drives the plot of this story. “...*for he wished to know everything; even sciences that did not exist.*” What does this mean to you? Can you imagine any sciences that do not exist, but perhaps someday could?
3. The closing decree against Vathek, Carathis, and Nouronihar, et. al. was that once their hearts took fire, they “...at once lost the most precious of the gifts of heaven—HOPE.” Do you agree with this statement that hope is the most valued notion humans have? Or do you disagree? What else could be argued as more important than hope?

4. After telling in great and lengthy detail about the fall and ultimate punishment of Vathek and company, William Beckford ends the story with a singular line (almost as an afterthought) regarding Gulchenrouz—who played a relatively minor role in the story—indicating that he passed his life in “undisturbed tranquility, and the pure happiness of childhood.” Why do you think the author ended the story in such a way?

5. *Vathek*’s greatest success seems to have come by way of influencing other authors, including Lord Byron and John Keats in the nineteenth century, and H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith in the twentieth, who all cited the book as inspirational in its style and imaginative qualities. What elements in the book or the literary style of the author could you see as inspirational to yourself or to other authors?

6. The term of Orientalism is used today to define a method of viewing Arabic people and culture in distorted and “uncivilized” or harmful ways. Often this image has been employed to reflect Western culture (i.e., “us” being readers of English or other Latin-based language) as familiar and holding socially acceptable views, contrasted against Eastern or “Oriental” culture, which is portrayed as strange, irrational, and often barbaric. Do you think this novel succeeded (at least partly) because of its Oriental setting, which made for sensationalist reading in its time (the late eighteenth century)? Could this book have been just as successful if the

author had changed the setting and culture to any other land and people?

7. Genii (known also as djinn) are supernatural spirits who are portrayed throughout literature and movies in countless ways from benevolent guardians to demonic tricksters. In this book the antagonistic Genius is depicted by Giaour, who tempts and ultimately leads Vathek into Eblis's underground realm, along the way demanding fifty children to devour. However in the book there are also benevolent Genii, such as the one who rescues Gulchenrouz and bestows upon him perpetual childhood. Why is it important to show the differences of alignment within this mythical race?
8. A literary theme is a main idea that a story presents, whether directly (or repeatedly) as a "major theme" or indirectly (or briefly) as a "minor theme." *Vathek* has numerous literary themes such as pride precipitating a downfall, the inequity of social order, the role of motherhood, etc. What are some other themes you can identify within this book?
9. Consider the adage: "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." For Vathek, who possessed seemingly insatiable appetites along with unchecked power, the story's ending seemed somewhat preordained. In terms both of a cautionary tale and by the certainty that the magnitude of his mounting transgressions can only, eventually, overwhelm him, could this book have ended any other way than by retribution

against his atrocious deeds? If his power had been checked or weakened early on, could that have ultimately saved him?

10. *Vathek* is categorized as a Gothic novel, although it is set in Oriental culture rather than the customary backdrop of castle, graveyard, church, or other locale of medieval-inspired architecture. Rather the classification comes more from the induction of a sense of terror for the reader as well as the emphasis on the supernatural. What do you consider are some of the most memorable or noteworthy supernatural elements in this story? Do you think each was needed as part of the plot or were they merely to populate and accentuate a tale of mystical journey?
11. Vathek and company set out on a great journey, both literally and metaphorically, to discover the palace of subterranean fire (the domain of Eblis), where they expect to discover the secrets of the universe. How important to you is it to travel to new places and discover unfamiliar things? How far would you travel to obtain something you desire?
12. This book presents a view of religious “indifference,” meaning Mahomet, as the Holy Prophet of Allah, witnesses Vathek’s pride and excesses, but chooses not to intervene, stating to the Genii, “Let us leave him to himself... let us see to what lengths his folly and impiety will carry him.” Do you think this is for the best, to let individuals make their own way without interference (or unasked advice) from others,

or should one with knowledge and means involve themselves in other people's lives, even if without invitation, if such act is reasoned to be charitable?

13. Vathek blames his mother for his final punishment: "...the principles by which Carathis perverted my youth have been the sole cause of my perdition!" To what degree is he right, that she has driven the course of his life to this inexorable conclusion? To what degree is he wrong, that Vathek is responsible for his own choices?
14. In a moment of magnanimity, a benevolent Genius, in the form of a shepherd, offers Vathek one last chance for redemption. Vathek nearly accepts it, until his pride rises up, and he sends the Genius off with scorning remarks. Looking back, Vathek might very well have regretted that decision. Have you ever done something you've later regretted? What lessons were you able to take away from the incident in order to make better choices the next time?