

LOVE IS A STRANGER

Treatment

Format: Feature

Genre: Gothic Romance / Supernatural Tragedy

Written by: Stephen Hall

Logline

A struggling young artist falls under the spell of a mysterious aristocratic woman who promises to make his dreams come true, only to discover that her beauty, patronage and love are sustained by a blood-bound bargain that grants brilliance and desire at the cost of his youth, his future and, ultimately, the lives of those trying to save him.

Overview

Love Is A Stranger is a dark, seductive gothic romance set in a recognisably modern world but haunted by much older appetites: immortality, grief, ambition, erotic possession and the fatal lure of being chosen. At its centre is **Johnny Lyle**, a young working-class artist drifting through dead-end sales work and unrealised talent, when he is drawn into the orbit of **Aveline de Clare**, a mysterious woman who appears first as a lonely elderly recluse and then reveals herself as something far stranger — an immortal being who sustains youth and vitality through a blood exchange that rejuvenates her while accelerating the life of the person bound to her.

For Johnny, Aveline offers everything he has secretly longed for: artistic momentum, financial freedom, love, status, access and a life transformed almost overnight. For a time, the bargain seems miraculous. His work flourishes, his confidence soars and the world finally appears to open for him. But the promise is poisoned. While Aveline grows younger and more radiant, Johnny begins to age unnaturally fast, his success becomes spiritually hollow, and the ordinary human life that might once have saved him recedes from view. Watching this from the outside is **Diane**, Johnny's oldest friend and neighbour, whose suspicion gradually becomes terror as she realises that what looks like romance and patronage is really a supernatural devouring. In the end, her attempt to break Aveline's hold destroys both her and Johnny, leaving Aveline once again the survivor of a chapter that has consumed everyone around her.

Tone and Style

The tone is lush, melancholic and quietly fatalistic — a gothic love story with the emotional structure of a fairy tale gone rotten. It begins in realist textures: cramped flats, supermarket shifts, tenement stairwells, suburban parents, low-paid hustle. Gradually it opens into old money, antiques, tailored suits, wine, private galleries and transatlantic success, but that widening world never loses its undercurrent of menace. The supernatural elements are intimate rather than bombastic. Blood is exchanged like sacrament, seduction and addiction all at once. Sinders, Aveline's black cat, moves through the film almost as a folkloric whisper: a subtle archetypal signal that this woman, and the house she inhabits, belong to an older order of enchantment and doom.

Treatment

The film opens with ritual and secrecy. Under rain and black mourning veil, **Aveline de Clare** stands beside a priest as the coffin of her husband Charles is lowered into the de Clare mausoleum. In the underground chamber she touches the stone sarcophagus, lays a rose upon it and says farewell in Latin: in death, you will not be forgotten. The scene immediately establishes Aveline as a figure shaped by old-world grief, family lineage and repeated encounters with death. Her sadness is real, but so is the sense that she has survived too much of life to inhabit mourning like other people do.

The story then drops into a much humbler world. **Johnny Lyle**, 26, is walking the city with a sports bag full of toiletries, selling door-to-door for small commission and enduring the low-grade indignities of customers who are either rude, indifferent or suspicious. He is intelligent, funny and visibly frustrated by a life that feels smaller than his imagination. He wants to study illustration, build a portfolio and make something meaningful of himself, but for now he is stuck between underpaid work and unrealised promise. Next door lives **Diane**, his neighbour and longtime friend, whose affection for him sits just below the surface of easy familiarity. Johnny either does not notice it or does not know what to do with it. His life is not tragic at this point. It is simply stalled. That stall is what makes him vulnerable.

One evening, while selling in a tenement block, Johnny reaches the top-floor flat of **Aveline de Clare**. She answers the door as an elderly widow — elegant, self-possessed and unexpectedly warm. Rather than dismissing him, she invites him inside for tea. Her apartment is dim, antique-filled and full of a vanished world's textures. She asks about his work, his ambitions, his art-school hopes. She listens in a way no one else in his life really does. She buys his entire stock to spare him further trouble. While preparing his tea, she lets drops of her blood fall into the cup. Johnny drinks, unaware of the act, and leaves filled with a strange exhilaration. Back home, he tells Diane about this amazing old woman with the valuable flat and the perfect tea, then stays up all night drawing, possessed by an almost supernatural creative rush.

He returns the next day, now drawn not only by gratitude and curiosity but by the feeling that something in him woke up in her company. This second visit pushes the story fully into the supernatural. Aveline gives him more blood-laced tea, asks whether he believes in magic, and begins to reveal the impossible truth: she is centuries old, her blood can make dreams come true, and the life she lives has been sustained through an exchange of blood with others. She speaks of Norman ancestors, medieval survival and a woman who once saved her in 1190. When Johnny demands to know what she is, Aveline does not mystify it beyond what is necessary. She tells him plainly that she needs blood to live, and that if he drinks from her, his own ambitions can become reality — but there will be a price. Johnny, intoxicated by possibility and unable to imagine the full consequence, chooses freely. He drinks directly from her wrist; she drinks from him in return. Her age falls away almost instantly. Johnny collapses back in ecstasy. When she returns from the bathroom, rejuvenated and newly radiant, the gothic fantasy is complete: the old woman has become the lover waiting to step into the second half of his life.

From this point, the relationship between Johnny and Aveline becomes both erotic and transactional, though never in a simplistic way. Aveline does not merely seduce Johnny physically. She seduces him into a whole world. She gives him a studio, money for materials, tailored clothes, gallery introductions and a life structured entirely around art, pleasure and possibility. She drinks his blood, he drinks hers, and each exchange fuses desire, creative release and bodily transformation. What Johnny had once imagined would take years of discipline and rejection now unfolds with dreamlike speed. He paints constantly. He feels alive, inspired and chosen. The working-class frustration of the opening vanishes beneath old money and old appetite.

The brilliance of the script is that Aveline's promise is not false in the simple sense. Johnny is talented. He does produce powerful work. Her patronage is real. His exhibition does happen. She genuinely opens doors. That is what makes the bargain tragic rather than merely manipulative. Aveline is not lying about his potential. She is accelerating it by feeding on the years he would otherwise have had to live it through. She gives him his dream and drains his life at the same time. The film therefore treats ambition as something vampiric not metaphorically but literally. Success, in this world, is not just won. It is purchased through blood, time and dependency.

Meanwhile, Diane begins to slip emotionally out of Johnny's orbit. At first she is simply confused by how quickly he changes: his energy, his confidence, the glamour suddenly attached to him, the studio, the wardrobe, the older woman. She invites him for dinner, tries to maintain normality, and even confesses what has likely been true for years — that she has seen him as more than a friend. But by then Johnny is already too far inside Aveline's world to respond honestly. Diane's emotional jealousy, however, is not the point. What matters is that she becomes the first person to sense that something is wrong at the level of reality itself. Aveline was an "old dear" one day and a stunning sophisticate the next. Johnny appears energised, then changed, then somehow polished into an entirely different class performance. Diane worries he is being used before she has any proof. That instinct becomes the film's moral compass.

As the months pass, Johnny's world grows richer and stranger. Aveline takes him to expensive restaurants and introduces him to society figures like **Fenella Hamilton** and the gallery world around **Quinten Barnaby**. His first exhibition is secured with astonishing speed. Collectors are excited. Patrons flirt. Reporters probe. His art begins touring internationally, all while Aveline remains his lover, patron, curator and keeper of the blood-bond that sustains them both. Johnny is remade as a public artist almost overnight. Yet at the same time, his body is beginning to tell another story. His hair greys. Crow's feet deepen. He coughs blood. He becomes physically diminished even as his name becomes more marketable. The higher he rises, the faster he burns.

Aveline's cat **Sinders** appears throughout these sequences almost incidentally — walking through rooms, leaping onto sills, observing, lingering at the edge of the frame. The detail is subtle but crucial. The film never leans into folklore too heavily, yet the image of the black cat orbiting Aveline makes Diane's later accusation of witchcraft feel not absurd but archetypally right. Aveline is not just an immortal aristocrat. She belongs to a whole vocabulary of gothic womanhood:

secluded, elegant, seductive, blood-bound, surrounded by heirlooms and shadow and an alley cat that seems to witness more than an ordinary pet should.

Johnny's family storyline deepens the sense of what he is losing. His mother **Marjorie** is slipping into dementia, forgetting the present, recalling his dead brother Peter, and increasingly existing in fragments. His father **Bob** bears this with a weary, humane acceptance that becomes one of the script's quiet moral anchors. Johnny wants Aveline to help, to give his mother back to them for a little longer if possible. Bob refuses, not because he is cold, but because he understands what Johnny still resists: borrowed time is not the same as peace. Better to love imperfectly within mortal limits than to manipulate life for one's own comfort. Bob's refusal stands in direct contrast to Aveline's whole philosophy of appetite and extension. He embodies the wisdom Johnny is too young and too dazzled to accept.

The emotional cost sharpens further when Johnny reaches the height of his public success. His exhibition opens, pieces are already sold, and wealthy Americans like **Hilary Collingwood** are waving unimaginable sums at his work. On paper, the dream is complete. He is no longer the young man dragging toiletries up tenement stairs. But inside, he is beginning to feel the rot. The rich collectors, journalists and gallery machinery no longer look like validation. They look like opportunism and spectacle. Aveline insists his work matters, and perhaps it does, but Johnny starts seeing that the world celebrating him often cares less about the work than about access, novelty and prestige. The dream, once fulfilled, begins to feel thin.

Diane's suspicion by now has turned into active investigation. In the library she searches old directories and finds **Aveline de Clare** listed in records going back to the nineteenth century. This is the moment when her intuition becomes certainty. Aveline is impossible. When Diane confronts her in the street, accusing her of witchcraft and demanding to know what she has done to Johnny, Aveline does not really deny the supernatural charge. Instead she reframes the entire situation in terms of choice and jealousy. Johnny came willingly. He knew enough. He wanted fame and fortune, and she gave him those things. Diane calls her a witch, which is emotionally true even if the script refuses to flatten her into stereotype. Aveline counters that love is honest, jealousy is the more dangerous force, and Diane should beware coveting what belongs to another. The exchange is brilliant because it reveals both women clearly: Diane as frightened moral witness, Aveline as someone who confuses possession with love so completely that she can still sound reasonable while defending predation.

By the time Johnny returns from the American leg of his exhibition, his body is collapsing. He coughs blood in the limousine from the airport. He feels drained, overexposed and increasingly disillusioned. Sitting in the studio among crates and mail, he finally articulates what the film has been leading him toward: this version of success does not satisfy him. He thought he wanted fame and recognition, but what he wanted was meaning. He wanted a life. Instead, he has become a name at the bottom of paintings being circulated among rich sycophants. Aveline answers that this was the bargain: she gave him what he wanted, and if it no longer appeals, that is not on her. She can only offer possibilities. He chose them. This is the story's darkest philosophical note — that predation is most devastating when it hides inside consent distorted by longing.

Then mortality closes in from another direction. Marjorie dies. Soon after, Johnny's father dies as well, apparently peacefully, after all his worry about losing another son. With his family gone and his own health worsening, Johnny finally chooses to stop. He tells Aveline his next exhibition will be his last. He wants to slow down, to step away, to hold on to what remains of himself. But the truth is that the bargain has already run too deep. When he asks whether he really has Aveline, whether she will be there forever, his question is no longer romantic. It is desperate. He paints over the eyes in their portrait, a potent image of blindness, denial and the impossibility of seeing one's own doom clearly enough to avoid it.

The climax returns to Aveline's old apartment, as though the entire tragic cycle must close where it began. Johnny, now reduced to a dark, frail figure by the fire, sits with Aveline in the lounge while she places before him a small glass of red liquid — more blood, more postponement, more life at a cost. He accuses her of bewitching him. She admits selfishness. He asks whether anyone will remember him. She tells him he will shine on for eternity. The scene is heartbreakingly intimate: whatever else Aveline is, she does love him in her own consuming way. But that love is inseparable from the structure that destroyed him.

Then Diane enters. She has gone to Cammy for help, obtained an old pistol, and come to stop what she now fully believes is witchcraft before it is too late. When she sees Johnny reduced to this near-terminal state by the fire, her worst fears are confirmed. She raises the gun, trembling, and points it at Aveline. Johnny, however, does not welcome

rescue. He tells Diane she has no right. She says Aveline is killing him. He tells Diane to leave. This is the film's cruelest turn: the one person who truly sees the danger is also the one Johnny cannot accept as saviour, because Aveline's hold on him is emotional, erotic and metaphysical. Diane is right, but right too late.

In the confrontation that follows, Diane shoots — but it is Johnny who is hit. Her attempt to save him kills him. It is the purest tragic inversion imaginable: the ordinary, human love that tried to intervene ends the life it meant to preserve. And then, in one of the script's most quietly brilliant gothic touches, **Sinders** leaps up at Diane in the chaos. Startled and thrown off balance, Diane falls backward and strikes her head on the fireplace. She dies there, the would-be rescuer undone not by magic in some grand explicit form, but by the black cat that has been stalking the edges of the story from the beginning. The archetype finally lands. Diane called Aveline a witch, and in the last seconds the house answers with the movement of its black cat and the fatal gravity of the hearth.

That ending transforms the film into full gothic tragedy. Johnny dies not from the bargain alone, but at the hands of the only person who tried to break it. Diane dies in the same attempt, a victim of her own desperate courage and the uncanny environment Aveline commands. Aveline survives, as she has survived so many other chapters. The pattern repeats: a mortal life flares up around her, mistakes her gift for salvation, and ends in loss. By the time the film reaches black, the title has fully revealed its meaning. Love is indeed a stranger — not because it is unknowable in the abstract, but because when it arrives in the wrong form, wearing elegance, intimacy and promises, it can become something unrecognisable from care.

Themes

At its core, *Love Is A Stranger* is about **wish fulfilment as predation**. Johnny is not deceived about what he wants — success, recognition, love, transformation. What destroys him is that Aveline really can offer those things, just at a cost he is too dazzled to understand when it still feels abstract. The film argues that the most dangerous bargains are often the ones that genuinely deliver.

It is also about **competing forms of love**. Aveline's love is passionate, real and entirely inseparable from consumption. She cherishes Johnny, but also feeds on him, shapes him and accepts his destruction as part of the bargain. Diane's love is awkward, underexpressed, working-class and ordinary — but it is the only form in the film that wants Johnny alive rather than transformed. The tragedy is that by the time Diane acts on that love, the spell of Aveline's world has already become stronger than any appeal to ordinary human care.

The film also explores **art, class and the fear of being nothing**. Johnny's hunger for recognition makes him vulnerable not because ambition is shameful, but because it is sincere. Aveline gives him the fantasy of class mobility, creative fulfilment and instant legitimacy. What he discovers too late is that accelerated success without rootedness becomes another form of erasure. He becomes a commodity before he becomes a self.

Finally, there is the theme of **the folkloric inside the modern**. The black cat, the blood bargain, the ageless woman in old rooms, the accusation of witchcraft — all the old symbols are present, but embedded in a modern city of supermarkets, gallery launches and airport transfers. The film suggests that ancient structures of seduction and doom do not disappear. They simply adapt their wardrobe.

Closing Statement

Love Is A Stranger is a haunting, seductive gothic tragedy about the terrible intimacy of getting exactly what you wished for. It begins as a supernatural romance, expands into a story about artistic ambition, class ascent and emotional hunger, and ends in a double death that leaves behind not justice, but the cold continuity of the immortal who survives. By folding Diane's doomed rescue attempt and the black-cat fatality into the ending, the film becomes not just a dark love story, but a fully realised gothic cautionary tale in which desire, envy, love and predation are inseparable until it is too late.