



The Gothic Artist: Art, Memory, and Immortality in Klaus Mikaelson

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Abstract

This paper examines the vampire-werewolf hybrid character of Klaus Mikaelson as a gothic artist whose paintings function as an attempt to resist the emotional erosion produced by immortality. While existing readings of Klaus largely focus on his violence and anti-heroism, this study puts forth his artistic sensibility to explore the intersections of gothic aesthetics, Romantic melancholy, memory, and emotional vulnerability in *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals*. The paper investigates why an immortal being paints, whether artistic creation can counterbalance destruction, and how art becomes a medium through which Klaus preserves intimacy and emotional continuity. Through an analysis of his artistic practices and his relationships with his closer ones, the study argues that painting functions as a fragile form of resistance against immortal forgetting. However, art ultimately fails to protect Klaus from grief, loneliness, and trauma, rendering him a profoundly tragic gothic figure whose paintings bear witness to the emotional burdens of immortality.

Keywords: Gothicism, Immortality, Melancholy, Memory, Vulnerability.

Introduction

The vampire has long occupied a central place within gothic literature and popular culture as a figure that embodies the tensions between desire and destruction, immortality and decay, and humanity and monstrosity. From Dracula to contemporary supernatural narratives, vampires frequently reflect anxieties surrounding alienation, unstable identity, and the psychological burden of eternal life. Unlike conventional monsters whose terror lies solely in physical violence, the vampire is often portrayed as emotionally tragic, condemned to experience endless repetition, loss, and loneliness. Immortality in gothic fiction rarely appears as liberation; instead, it produces emotional exhaustion and a gradual fragmentation of the self.

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Within this tradition, Klaus Mikaelson emerges as a particularly complex character because he complicates the conventional image of the vampire villain through both his artistic sensibility and his hybrid identity. Introduced in *The Vampire Diaries* and later expanded in *The Originals*, Klaus is initially defined by brutality, paranoia, and an obsessive desire for control. As the world's first vampire-werewolf hybrid, he occupies a position that renders him perpetually caught between categories, belonging fully to neither species. This condition of hybridity deepens his sense of isolation and reinforces the instability that characterizes much of his emotional life. Yet beneath this violent exterior exists an unexpectedly sensitive artistic self. Klaus paints, sketches, and repeatedly turns toward artistic expression. His paintings reveal a subject haunted not only by rage but also by memory, melancholy, longing, and the fear of emotional disappearance.

Klaus's artistic sensibility raises several important questions that remain largely unexplored in scholarship on vampire fiction and popular culture. Why does an immortal creature paint? What compels someone who has transcended death to preserve emotions and memories on a canvas? Can artistic creation counterbalance centuries of violence and destruction? More importantly, does art become the only space where Klaus can express vulnerability without fear of betrayal or abandonment? These questions position Klaus not merely as a supernatural antihero but as a distinctly gothic artist whose creativity emerges from trauma, loneliness, and existential crisis. Drawing on Gothic melancholy, Romantic artistry, and memory studies, this paper argues that Klaus Mikaelson's paintings function as fragile attempts to preserve emotional continuity within immortal existence.

The Gothic Artist and Romantic Melancholy

The figure of the artist occupies an important place in both Gothic and Romantic traditions, often appearing as an isolated individual marked by emotional intensity, alienation, and creative struggle. Romantic literature, in particular, frequently links artistic sensibility with suffering and heightened emotional perception. This tradition finds expression in the Byronic hero: a proud, melancholic, morally ambiguous figure marked by loneliness, emotional excess, rebellion, and self-destructive tendencies. One of the most influential examples of this archetype is Byron's *Manfred*, whose protagonist is haunted by guilt, alienated from human society, and condemned to live with memories that cannot be forgotten. Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe's Roderick Usher in *The Fall of the House of Usher* embodies the Gothic artist whose heightened sensitivity and creative imagination are inseparable from his psychological suffering. Both Manfred and Usher occupy liminal spaces between creation and destruction, their artistic temperaments intensifying rather than alleviating their isolation. Like these figures, Klaus Mikaelson is marked by loneliness, unresolved trauma, and a desire for connection that is often undermined by his own actions. Although initially presented as a violent hybrid, he gradually emerges as a Romantic figure whose artistic sensibility reveals a more vulnerable dimension of his character.

Klaus embodies many characteristics associated with the gothic antihero. He is emotionally excessive, haunted by childhood trauma, and trapped within cycles of rage and guilt. His immortality intensifies these traits rather than resolving them. Unlike human subjects who experience grief within the finite structure of mortal life, Klaus carries centuries of unresolved emotional wounds. His memories do not fade naturally with time; instead, they accumulate, producing what may be understood as gothic melancholy, a condition in which the subject remains permanently attached to loss. Klaus himself acknowledges the persistence of loss when he reflects that "the passage of time" does not simply erase suffering but leaves enduring scars (Paradise et al., 2013). The statement reflects the persistence of emotional suffering within immortal existence, where time does not necessarily diminish loss but can instead intensify its weight. His artistic practice emerges precisely from this condition of

emotional accumulation. Klaus paints not because he possesses leisure or aesthetic refinement, but because artistic creation becomes one of the few mechanisms through which he can externalize emotions that immortality renders unbearable.

This connection between melancholy and artistic production aligns Klaus with the Romantic image of the tortured creator. Throughout the series, his paintings often appear during moments of emotional vulnerability or introspection rather than triumph. Art becomes associated with silence, solitude, and reflection, functioning as a counterpoint to the violence that otherwise defines him. While Klaus frequently expresses himself through aggression in social relationships, painting allows him to communicate through preservation rather than destruction. The contrast is significant: his violence consumes bodies and relationships, whereas his art attempts to stabilize fleeting emotional experiences. In this sense, Klaus embodies the Romantic paradox of the creator-destroyer, a figure capable of immense cruelty while simultaneously yearning for beauty and transcendence.

Klaus's artistic sensibility is closely tied to his experience of loneliness and unstable relationships. Repeatedly confronted with betrayal, loss, and emotional distance, he often turns to painting as a means of self-expression. Art provides a space through which he can communicate feelings that remain difficult to articulate otherwise. This artistic vulnerability is especially important because it destabilizes the simplistic distinction between monster and human that structures much vampire fiction. Klaus's capacity for artistic sensitivity complicates his role as a villain by revealing that monstrosity and emotional depth coexist within the same subject. Rather than humanizing Klaus in a reductive sense, the series presents art as evidence of contradiction: the same figure capable of extraordinary violence also produces images shaped by tenderness, nostalgia, and emotional longing. This tension between brutality and beauty lies at the core of gothic aesthetics itself.

Klaus's artistic sensibility also reflects a resistance to the emotional detachment often associated with immortality. His paintings function as attempts to preserve memory and feeling despite centuries of loss and trauma, revealing a continuing capacity for attachment, grief, and reflection.

Painting as Resistance to Immortal Forgetting

A central anxiety within gothic representations of immortality is the fear not merely of death but of emotional erosion. While immortality ensures physical survival, it can weaken the stability of memory and emotional attachment. For immortal figures such as Klaus, centuries of accumulated experiences make it increasingly difficult to preserve emotional continuity. In *The Originals* and *The Vampire Diaries*, Klaus Mikaelson repeatedly confronts this burden of endless emotional accumulation. His paintings emerge within this context as attempts to resist forgetting and preserve a sense of emotional connection.

Unlike mortal characters whose memories are structured through aging and eventual death, Klaus exists outside ordinary temporal frameworks. He survives wars, migrations, betrayals, and the deaths of countless individuals, carrying memories that cannot naturally fade through the passage of time. Yet immortality does not guarantee emotional permanence. On the contrary, the series suggests that endless survival produces a gradual desensitization in which relationships become transient and grief repetitive. Klaus himself frequently displays emotional exhaustion beneath his aggression, as though centuries of survival have made intimacy increasingly difficult to sustain. Within this emotional landscape, painting becomes a form of resistance against the fragmentation of memory.

Klaus's paintings function as visual archives through which he attempts to preserve

people, moments, and emotional states that immortality threatens to dissolve. Unlike speech, which disappears once spoken, paintings create material traces capable of outlasting the instability of memory itself. This function of art can be understood through Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* or "sites of memory." Nora (1989) argues that such sites emerge when lived memory becomes vulnerable to disappearance, observing that "memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events" (p. 22). Klaus's paintings operate as precisely such sites of memory. Faced with centuries of accumulated experiences and relationships, he repeatedly transforms emotions into material objects capable of resisting oblivion. The canvas becomes a repository for memories that immortality cannot reliably preserve, allowing art to function as a defense against forgetting. Klaus's desire to paint reflects a fear that experiences, attachments, and relationships may fade across centuries of existence.

This relationship between art and preservation is particularly significant because Klaus inhabits a world shaped by fear, possession, and the constant threat of loss. Despite repeatedly professing his devotion to his family through the mantra "Always and Forever," he often responds to the fear of abandonment by daggering his siblings and placing them in magical suspension. In this sense, the dagger becomes a distorted counterpart to the paintbrush: both are instruments through which Klaus attempts to hold on to what he fears losing. Yet unlike violence, his paintings seek to preserve emotional rather than physical possession. This impulse becomes especially visible in his relationships with those who recognize the vulnerability beneath his monstrous exterior. Camille O'Connell recognizes the emotional depth concealed beneath Klaus's violent exterior, while his sketch of Caroline Forbes reveals art as a medium of intimacy and vulnerability. This association between creativity and connection reaches its fullest expression in his relationship with Hope Mikaelson, where painting becomes a shared form of connection and an alternative legacy. Through these relationships, art functions as Klaus's most enduring attempt to sustain meaningful attachments within the instability of immortal existence.

The Paradox of the Creator-Destroyer

One of the central contradictions that defines Klaus Mikaelson is the coexistence of extraordinary violence and profound artistic sensitivity within the same subject. Throughout *The Originals* and *The Vampire Diaries*, Klaus is repeatedly characterized as destructive: he murders without hesitation, manipulates those closest to him, and frequently transforms love into possession or control. Yet the series simultaneously presents him as a creator, a painter capable of aesthetic perception and artistic reflection. This tension between destruction and creation is central to understanding Klaus not merely as a hybrid villain but as a distinctly gothic artist whose creativity emerges from the same emotional excess that produces violence.

The gothic tradition frequently blurs the boundary between beauty and horror, presenting creation and destruction not as opposites but as interconnected forces. Klaus embodies this paradox through the contrast between the worlds he ruins and the images he preserves. His violence consumes lives and relationships, often leaving emotional devastation in its wake. At the same time, his paintings attempt to capture beauty, memory, and emotional permanence. The coexistence of these impulses suggests that Klaus's artistic practice functions partly as a response to the destructive nature of his existence.

Importantly, the series often associates Klaus's most vulnerable moments with artistic or aesthetic perception rather than with power. He repeatedly turns toward art during periods of emotional isolation, grief, or introspection, suggesting that painting offers temporary escape from the cycles of violence that dominate his social existence. Unlike his interactions with others, which are shaped by suspicion and control, the act of painting does not require conquest. Artistic creation becomes one of the few spaces where Klaus does not perform authority or

aggression.

This tension between violence and creativity also aligns Klaus with the Romantic figure of the tortured artist whose sensitivity coexists with self-destructive impulses. Romantic and gothic traditions frequently portray artists as emotionally excessive individuals whose creative capacities emerge from suffering, alienation, or psychological fragmentation. Klaus's art similarly arises from emotional instability rather than serenity.

The coexistence of artistic sensitivity and monstrosity intensifies the tragedy of Klaus's character. His paintings reveal that he possesses the emotional capacity for beauty, intimacy, and preservation yet remains unable to sustain these impulses consistently within his life.

Thus, Klaus emerges as a profoundly gothic creator-destroyer figure whose art exposes the instability of the boundary between monstrosity and emotional sensitivity. His paintings do not redeem violence, but they reveal the persistent struggle against emotional numbness beneath it.

Art and Emotional Recognition

The relationship between art, memory, and emotional preservation becomes most visible through Klaus Mikaelson's interactions with those who recognize the vulnerable self-concealed character beneath his monstrous reputation. In *The Originals*, Camille O'Connell occupies a crucial position because she perceives Klaus not merely as a feared hybrid or ruthless ruler but as an emotionally fractured individual shaped by grief, loneliness, and longing. Their relationship develops through conversation, psychological insight, and aesthetic sensibility rather than supernatural power. Camille repeatedly identifies the insecurity and fear of abandonment underlying Klaus's aggression, encouraging him to confront aspects of himself that he habitually conceals behind domination and cruelty. Unlike most characters who respond only to his reputation, she recognizes the imaginative and reflective self beneath the violence. This recognition is evident when Klaus tells her that he "fancies infinite possibilities," a statement that reveals a dimension of his character often obscured by brutality (Paradise et al., 2014). The language of possibility is significant because it reflects not only the perspective of an immortal being but also the sensibility of an artist who remains invested in beauty, imagination, and emotional potential. Significantly, Klaus appears more willing to reveal himself through artistic expression than through direct confession, using painting as a medium through which emotional vulnerability can emerge without the risks associated with interpersonal dependence.

A similar dynamic is visible in his relationship with Caroline Forbes in *The Vampire Diaries*. Klaus's fascination with Caroline culminates in the Mikaelson Ball, where he presents her with a hand-drawn sketch. The gift is significant because it represents one of the few moments in which Klaus uses art to communicate admiration, affection, and emotional openness rather than power or manipulation. Unlike many of his interactions, which are structured by control, the sketch functions as a voluntary act of emotional exposure. His desire for permanence within human relationships is further reflected in his famous declaration to Caroline, "He's your first love. I intend to be your last" (Plec et al., 2013). While often read as a romantic gesture, the statement also reveals Klaus's deeper longing to overcome transience and secure an enduring place within another person's emotional life. In this context, both the sketch and the declaration emerge from the same impulse that motivates his paintings: a desire to preserve connection against the inevitability of loss and separation. Art therefore becomes a language of intimacy through which Klaus expresses feelings that speech alone cannot convey.

Art and Inheritance

This connection between creativity and emotional continuity reaches its fullest expression in Klaus's relationship with his daughter, Hope Mikaelson. The question of inheritance occupies a central place within Klaus's character arc, particularly because his own life has been shaped by the trauma inflicted by Mikael. When Hayley questions why Mikael continues to exert such influence over him despite not being his biological father, Klaus replies that Mikael has done "damage only a father can," revealing his awareness of the generational nature of trauma (Ademu-John et al., 2014). Consequently, the conceiving of Hope intensifies his fear that he may pass on violence, paranoia, and emotional ruin rather than love.

Against this backdrop, Hope's artistic sensibility acquires symbolic importance. During their first meeting after years of separation, Hope's words, "Mommy said you like to paint too," establish creativity as a point of recognition and connection between father and daughter (MacIntyre & Anderson, 2018). Her engagement with painting suggests the continuation of an alternative legacy, one rooted in creativity and emotional expression. This dynamic recalls Hirsch's (2008) concept of "postmemory," in which experiences are "transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (p. 103). Through painting, Hope inherits not only a skill but also an emotional way of relating to the world.

The significance of this continuity becomes clearer when viewed alongside the trajectory of Klaus's character arc. Throughout much of the series, he attempts to preserve relationships through control, possession, or emotional withdrawal. However, his relationship with Hope gradually redirects this desire for preservation away from the self and toward the future of another. In this sense, the series quietly anticipates the ultimate sacrifice through which Klaus chooses Hope's survival over his own immortality, suggesting that genuine preservation lies not in eternal existence but in the ability to secure continuity beyond oneself. Artistic inheritance therefore becomes one of the series' most powerful responses to the gothic fear of oblivion. Through Hope, Klaus discovers that what endures is not the immortal self but the emotional legacy one leaves behind.

The Limits of Artistic Preservation

Despite the emotional significance of painting in Klaus Mikaelson's life, *The Originals* ultimately refuses to present art as a complete remedy for trauma, loneliness, or immortal suffering. Klaus repeatedly turns to artistic creation, yet his art remains fundamentally limited. His paintings capture emotional traces, but they cannot prevent abandonment, heal fractured relationships, or free him from the cycles of violence, possessiveness, and melancholy that define his existence. Like many Gothic acts of preservation, they remain haunted by absence, preserving what has already been lost. Yet Nora (1989) reminds us that sites of memory emerge precisely because living memory is no longer secure. Klaus's paintings therefore reveal a paradox: they exist because emotional continuity has already been threatened. The more desperately he seeks to preserve intimacy through art, the more visible the fragility of that intimacy becomes. This failure is central to Klaus's tragedy as a Gothic artist. The more Klaus attempts to preserve intimacy through art, the more its fragility is revealed. While painting allows him to preserve traces of love and humanity, it cannot secure permanence or prevent loss. Ultimately, his sacrifice for Hope completes his transformation from possession to selflessness, revealing that true preservation lies not in immortality or art, but in the future one leaves behind.

Conclusion

Klaus Mikaelson emerges as a distinctly Gothic artist whose paintings reveal the emotional

tensions beneath his monstrous identity. While violence allows him to exert power over others, art becomes a means of preserving memory, intimacy, and traces of humanity against the effects of immortal existence. Through his relationships with other characters, the series demonstrates how creativity can function as a medium of vulnerability, recognition, and inheritance. However, painting ultimately fails to shield Klaus from grief, loneliness, and loss. His art preserves emotional traces but cannot fully overcome the trauma and isolation produced by eternal life. His paintings therefore reflect a central Gothic tension: the desire to hold on to memories and relationships even as time and loss render such preservation incomplete.

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