

Mindless Monsters: The Evolution of Vampire Mythology in Modern Fiction

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Vampires existed in mythology for centuries, serving as terrifying reminders of humanity and death. They have as monsters, sexual deviants, religious blasphemers or reflections of religious values, romantic antagonists, and even the tortured undead. This article discusses the evolution of vampires in modern fiction as a facilitator for discussion of taboo topics. These topics include race, gender, religion, and intolerance within society.

Vampires existed in mythology for centuries, serving as terrifying reminders of humanity and death. They have as monsters, sexual deviants, religious blasphemers or reflections of religious values, romantic antagonists, and even the tortured undead. Even with all of the roles that vampires fill, until the 1970s most vampire portrayals remained largely homogenous. Vampires drank the blood of their victims, changed into animal form, and shied away from garlic and religious relics. Essentially, vampires remained mindless monsters. After the publication of Anne Rice's first novel, vampires modernized, challenging and defying traditional vampire mythology. Anne Rice reinvented vampires, and her example led writers such as Charlaine Harris, Joss Whedon, and Stephanie Meyer to use vampires as tools of discussion for taboo topics like gender, race, religion, and intolerance within society.

The character of Louis de Pointe du Lac from Anne Rice's *Interview With the Vampire* differs from traditional vampires because he possesses passions, desires, anger, triumphs and disappointments. Louis's ability to experience these emotions makes him into more than just a monster, yet his natural instinct to feed upon human blood, and his ultimate decision to do so places him between a monster and a human. "I'm flesh and blood, but not human. I haven't been human for two hundred years."¹ Louis says of his existence, recognizing that though he shares characteristics with humans, he also resembles and behaves like a monster. He continues by saying, "What constitutes evil, real evil, is the taking of a single human life," as defense of why he more closely resembles a monster.²

In order to reconcile his own conscience and his desire to feed from humans, Louis first decides only to feed from animals, and later decides that though he will feed on humans, he will not take their lives while doing so. "Pain is terrible for you...You feel it like no other creature because you are a vampire," Lestat, Louis's sire, tells him earlier in the story.³ Louis spends much of his early life as a vampire revolted by what he is. He lives just as miserably as when he was human, though now much more solemnly, despite the company of his sire and his continued existence as the master of a large plantation. After several weeks of feeding off of chicken blood,

¹ *Interview with the Vampire*. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.

² Anne Rice. *Interview with the Vampire*. New York: Ballantine, 1976. 238.

³ Rice, 88.

Louis burns down his plantation house in the middle of a slave revolt, a form of penance for his evil existence.⁴ Louis' guilt consumes him in the time after he burns down his Louisiana home, and he separates from his creator for the first time.

When Lestat finds Louis again, he mocks him for living off the blood of rats, then tempts him with the blood of a dying child. After some internal struggles, Louis gives in to his deepest carnal desire and feeds upon the young girl. "Her blood coursed through my veins sweeter than life itself. And as it did, Lestat's words made sense to me. I knew peace only when I killed, and when I heard her heart in that terrible rhythm, I knew again what peace could be."⁵ From this point onward, Louis accepts his role as an evil entity, feeding on humans as needed. Unlike traditional vampires, Louis detests what it means to be a vampire, and he fights the associated urges in order to maintain his remaining humanity. Ultimately, and after much suffering, Louis gives into his natural instincts, not because he is evil, but because he must in order to have a peaceful existence.

Rice's vampires also challenge traditional vampire myth in another way. In an article about the roles and behavior of vampires, George E. Haggerty argues that writers of current vampire fiction, especially Anne Rice of *The Vampire Chronicles* fame, uses vivid imagery and vampires themselves in an expression of "homoeroticism."⁶ Much of the argument focuses on vampire Louis' companion, the vampire Lestat. Lestat, according to Haggerty, represents older western culture, specifically that of 18th century France, before unwillingly transforming into a vampire. At the same time, Lestat also represents the return to the homosexual origins of vampires themselves which had not existed in vampire literature since the Victorian Era.⁷

According to Haggerty, Rice's vampires reflect a homosexual lifestyle (despite the inability to engage in any sexual practice) and did so prior to and during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Haggerty suggests that the public reading these books were groups of "emasculated men" and a society terribly afraid of the devastating effects of AIDS. Rice's books, however, portray homosexual men as strong and unaffected by disease. Rice's novels found an outlet for their growing need for accepted homosexuality and sexuality itself.

Although the publication of *Interview with the Vampire* marks the birth of modern vampire mythology, other popular works continue to redefine vampires and their roles in modern fiction.

Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* served as an outlet of another kind, stretching over a fifteen year period of time. Vampire historian and author Stacey Abbot points out that the most interesting difference between older vampire legends and those that became popular in the 1970s and onward involves a connection to Christianity and other religious or ritualistic practices.⁸ Vampires resembling those in traditional myths and stories share a common

⁴ *Interview with the Vampire*. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.

⁵ *Interview with the Vampire*. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.

⁶ George E. Haggerty. "Anne Rice and the Queering of Culture." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. 1(1998): 5.

⁷ Haggerty, 7.

⁸ Stacey Abbot, "A Little Less Ritual and a Little More Fun: The Modern Vampire in Buffy the Vampire Slayer." *Slayage: The International Journal of Buffy Studies*. 3 (2006): 9. <http://slayageonline.com/>.

reverence or fear of religious relics or practices. In addition to Abbots's assertions, historian Christopher Herbert points out that older vampire fiction, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, specifically promoted religious convictions while at the same time, criticized a return to the belief of superstition and black magic. The characters in *Dracula* frequently asked God for salvation from the terror of Dracula.⁹ The idea here, as Herbert suggests, is that religion itself should be utilized in such a way that it completely combats the magical elements of the world. However, modern vampire fiction contrasts with traditional vampire fiction in its unique regard to the role religion continues to play. Clearly, the abandonment of religion played a key part in the transition.

Season one of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* depicts a more traditional view of vampire myth. Ancient vampires remain regarded as superiors within the vampire community, and their goals and orders are not only respected but closely followed by younger vampires. These older vampires and their followers concern themselves with religious observances, often praying to or worshipping some deity. These vampires also recognize the existence of hell specifically as the fate of any vampire who dies. Vampire creation also involves aspects of religion and spirituality as it consists of draining a victim's blood, letting that victim drink blood from a vampire, the soul leaving the body of the victim, and a demon replacing the soul, though the newly created vampire retains the memories of the soul that formerly inhabited it.¹⁰ The demonic possession of the vampire body causes vampires to behave violently and immorally. Once a vampire obtains a soul, the vampire chooses to behave morally and ethically, but obligation to do so does not exist.¹¹ Despite the choices made by vampires containing souls, many continue to fear going to hell.

Buffy challenges traditional vampire mythology in several ways. This struggle continues throughout the whole series, and concerns not only the vampires within the story, but also the manner in which they are regarded and fought. The antagonist of season one is an ancient vampire known as the Master.¹² The Master is considered one of the oldest existing vampires, although debates exist due to inconsistency between various episodes. His age affords him leadership of the Order of Aurelius vampire cult, more defined powers, strength, and respect from his fellow vampires.¹³ In contrast with ritualistic and traditional vampires like the Master, *Buffy* also portrays another group of vampires who lack any loyalty to or observance of traditional vampire roles and practices. These vampires, such as series regular Spike, a vampire turned in the 1800s, remain largely self-indulgent throughout despite their age or experience.

Spike drinks, smokes, engages in poker games, and even mocks traditional vampire rituals. Spike's first appearance in *Buffy* shows him killing members of the Order of Aurelius and tying up and verbally assaulting a Order of Aurelius vampire before killing him. During this encounter, Spike criticizes the behavior of the traditionalist vampires, revealing that many of the

⁹ Christopher Herbert, "Vampire Religion." *Representations*. 79. (2002): 100.

¹⁰ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Collectors Set*, Season One. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2006.

¹¹ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Seasons 1-7.

¹² *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Collectors Set*, Season One.

¹³ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Welcome to The Hellmouth", Season One. DVD. 20th Century Fox. 2006.

claims they make about their own holiness and purity as vampires often derive from lies. “If every vampire who said he was at the crucifixion was actually there, it would have been like Woodstock,” says Spike.¹⁴ He observes no spiritual or ritualistic activities and is generally violent towards those who do, going so far as to demand the abandonment of rituals to make way for a new order. “From now on, we’re gonna have a little less ritual and a little more fun around here.”¹⁵ Spike’s personal disregard for religious ceremony becomes as equally present in Sunnydale, the location of the show, as the more traditional set of vampires.¹⁶

The basic characteristics often associated with vampires do not consistently comply with Whedonverse vampires. These vampires look exactly like human beings and can blend in with humans undetectably. When a vampire feeds, the face and teeth undergo a physical transformation, revealing the demonic possession of the body. This differs from the Anne Rice vampires who permanently possess the physical requirements that allow feeding and are also eternally beautiful. Additionally, vampires within the *Buffy* myth can alter their appearance such as cut and dye their hair in much the same way that humans can where as Anne Rice vampires eternally look the way they did at time of death. Such practices can be observed with the character of Angel. Angel’s hair changes length based on the period of time shown in the series. He also builds muscle mass between seasons one and two, indicating that vampires can work out and build muscle mass.

Vampire diet in the Whedonverse reflects more traditional aspects of vampire mythology. Vampires drink blood from humans, both dead and alive. Human blood remains preferable over other blood to the Whedonverse vampire, but these vampires also tend to enjoy and survive well on warm pig’s blood.¹⁷ Nothing within the Whedonverse suggests that vampires do less well on substitutes for human blood, though the taste of human blood differs from other blood. Consumption of blood remains the only important matter for the vampire. Whedon’s vampires exist as a hybrid of tradition and modern adaptation, both honoring and mocking the roles of vampires. However, Joss Whedon is not the only person to follow Anne Rice in creating a modern vampire mythology.

The vampires in Charlaine Harris’s novels, and in the HBO television series inspired by her novels, most resemble the traditional vampires out of all of the vampires discussed for this research. According to Harris’s first novel, *Dead Until Dark*, vampires drink human blood for sustenance, and suffer from starvation or insanity if they do not feed often enough. These vampires suffer when exposed to sunlight, eventually leading to death, are irritated by garlic, and they also die from the application of a sharp wooden object through their hearts.¹⁸ All of these traits link these vampires back to their monstrous origins. Of course, there are some traits that resemble the new trends in vampire mythology, such as the vampire conscience which

¹⁴ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “School Hard”, Season One. DVD. 20th Century Fox. 2006.

¹⁵ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “School Hard”, Season One. DVD. 20th Century Fox. 2006.

¹⁶ Spike does, in later seasons, contradict his aversion to vampire tradition in the episode “All The Way” when he scolds a younger vampire for violence on Halloween. “It’s Halloween,” he tells the young vampire, “You’re supposed to take the night off.”

¹⁷ *Angel the Series*, Seasons 1-5. DVD 20th Century Fox, 2007.; *Buffy*.

¹⁸ *True Blood*, “Strange Love.” HBO. 2008.

allows them to choose whether or not to feed off of humans or animals, and they also lack any fear of crucifixes.¹⁹

The evolution of the vampires in this myth focuses less on the vampires themselves and more on the world in which they live. The premise of Harris's books revolves around the idea that mystical creatures, such as vampires, werewolves, werepanthers, and shape shifters, openly coexist with humans. In the first book/season of this story, vampires expose their existence to the human world, and this occurs almost simultaneously with the release of a Japanese invented blood substitute for medical purposes and later for the vampire diet. Vampires can drink the substance and obtain all the required nutrients for survival. Drinking the synthetic blood has an unintended, although positive side effect. Those who choose to drink synthetic blood tend to be less violent, more moral, and more human than the vampires who choose to continue drinking human blood. There are deterrents for drinking synthetic blood. Among the less serious is the that synthetic blood, labeled True Blood, does not resemble the taste of blood which presents a problem for many vampires.²⁰

Those vampires who choose to go mainstream, or enter the world of humans while observing the laws and rules of society, face having to exist solely on a diet of True Blood. Those who do not choose to go this route must remain essentially underground. Humans create legislation to ensure the civil rights of vampires within human society, but those rights must coincide with mainstreaming. "Discrimination against vampires is punishable by law in the great state of Louisiana," says Malcolm, a vampire trying to obtain service at a local bar within an episode of *True Blood*.²¹ With all of these things in mind, Harris's vampires live in a world where their existence is an accepted part of life, but they do not receive a warm welcome from most humans. The only human who seems to consistently welcome vampires into the human lifestyle, Sookie Stackhouse, cannot even claim to be fully human, though this particular information remains unknown until later in the series.²²

One interesting point to mention about the vampire abilities in Harris' vampire mythology involves the human consumption of blood. A human can consume small amounts of blood from vampires in order to gain heightened physical abilities.²³ Harris's vampires use the ability more often than other stories. The main difference in the consumption of vampire blood by humans in these stories, at least according to the television adaptation of Harris's story, revolves around the idea that vampire blood possesses drug like effects on individuals who consume too much of it. In the first novel, a market exists for vampire blood because of its ability strengthening on humans as well as its use as an aphrodisiac, but the television show turns the possibility of overconsumption into an all-out addiction.²⁴ In both the television show and novel, humans attack and hold down a vampire, named Bill Compton, with the intent of draining

¹⁹ *True Blood*, "Sparks Fly Out." HBO. 2008.

²⁰ Charlaine Harris. *Dead Until Dark*. New York: Ace, 2008.

²¹ *True Blood*, "Burning House of Love." HBO. 2008.

²² *True Blood*. "The First Taste." HBO. 2008.

²³ *True Blood*. "Sparks Fly Out." HBO. 2008.

²⁴ Harris, and *True Blood*. "The First Taste." HBO. 2008.

his blood. In doing this, the humans demonstrate more monstrous behavior than some of the vampires within the story, which questions why vampires are considered evil when humans engage in activities similar to vampires.

One of the most recent vampire mythologies that provide another reinvention of the vampire genre first appeared in 2005 with the publication of the young adult book *Twilight* written by Stephanie Meyer. In an interview with *Twilight* author Stephanie Meyer, Meyer reveals that many times, the mythology of any specific vampire tale is either made up, or a combination of bits and pieces of other vampire myth as well as personal ideas.²⁵ Evolution of vampires within this fiction relates more to physical aspects of vampirism than to other characteristics, but others do exist as well. Meyer's vampires do not die very easily. Their skin resembles marble: cold, smooth, and rock solid. For that reason, beheading and staking, two traditional means of killing vampires, have little effect on the vampire body. The vampire body receives no damage from exposure to sunlight either. Edward Cullen, a character within the fiction, tells protagonist Bella Swan that the only certain way to kill a vampire, "is to tear him to shreds, and then burn the pieces."²⁶

The method of making vampires also differs from other vampire myths discussed in this research because it does not include the vampire draining the victim and the victim drinking vampire blood in return. Instead, Edward Cullen tells Bella Swan that when a vampire begins drinking the blood of its victim, stopping almost becomes an impossibility.²⁷ If a vampire does bite a human victim, and manages to stop, the victim will suffer from venom spreading throughout the body, slowly and painfully transforming that person into a vampire.²⁸ As discussed in all the prior works of vampire fiction within this research, vampires within Meyer's world possess a conscience and can make a choice to eat and/or drink blood from a source other than humans. In *Twilight*, vampires choose to either exist as "vegetarians," a term applied to vampires who feed off of animals and not humans, or they choose to feast from humans.

Given all of the changes in vampire mythology since 1976, it becomes clear that vampires from the past received different portrayals than the more modern vampires. Slowly but surely, vampires transformed from mindless monsters to thinking and rational individuals who possessed the ability to think and reason in the same manner that human beings do. These stories modernizing vampires serve as vehicles for forbidden topics in society.

Sexuality and sexual relationships continually show in vampire fiction. These relationships range from the more conventional and conservative pairing of male and female sharing the same social, racial, and class background to more liberal relationships. Traditional vampire myths share the range of relationship types with more modern vampires, but the modern vampire stories more frequently show less conventional relationships. Anne Rice, for example, frequently uses male vampires and their relationships with one another to further the story. As

²⁵ Stephanie Meyer Interview. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Adftz0CdjC4>.

²⁶ Stephanie Meyer. *Twilight*. New York: Little Brown and Company, 2005. 398.

²⁷ Meyer, 262.

²⁸ Meyer, 332, and *Twilight*. DVD. Summit Entertainment, 2009.

suggested by Haggerty, homoeroticism plays a large role in Rice's novels. In *Interview with the Vampire* alone, Louis makes up part of two separate couples. In the first half of the novel, Louis's relationship with Lestat exists because of loyalty that Louis feels towards his maker, affection from Lestat towards his creations, and a need for companionship that both vampires desire. As the novel continues onward, Louis loses interest in Lestat, breaks free of him, and begins a relationship with another vampire named Armand. *The Vampire Chronicles*, first published in the 1970s and 1980s, addressed the presence of homosexuality in the world, presenting it as a normal part of life, challenging the conservative and homophobic view the general public took of homosexuality at this time.

Commentary on interspecies relationships also exists within vampire fiction. The fiction of Whedon, Harris, and Meyer all revolve around this concept. The premise of each story involves a female human meeting and falling in love with a vampire (or multiple vampires) and entering into relationships with these creatures. Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* engages in two such relationships, first with Angel and then with Spike. This relationship garners negative attention and criticism from Buffy's friends in both cases who believed that humans, especially a human destined to fight evil as is Buffy's lot in life, should not enter into a relationship with monstrous creatures like vampires. Sookie Stackhouse from Harris's novels enters into several different relationships with several different vampires, and these relationships gained the same negative attention from her friends and acquaintances as Buffy had from her own. Bella Swan from Meyer's work enters a relationship with Edward Cullen and later marries him, which differs from the relationships of the others mentioned. She too receives negative feedback from her friend Jacob Black on her relationship with a vampire.

Often, the objection to these relationships does not focus on the dangers of a human-vampire relationship, and instead often mention the inferior nature of the vampire in comparison to humans. Xander Harris of *Buffy* often compares vampires to animals unable to control their primal instincts around humans while Tara from *True Blood* makes a similar claim. Jacob Black from *Twilight* even uses the derogatory terms "blood sucker" and "leech" when talking about vampires. Such reactions from humans within these different fictions come off as similar to reactions made over interracial relationships. Real life interracial couples, even if not hassled during the whole length of their relationships, often find themselves subjects of critical judgment from outside sources. No matter legislation or experience, the women and vampires in these stories face the same difficulties and lack of support that interracial couples do in real life.

Feminism and gender equality, two other controversial topics, also receive frequent references within vampire stories. For the *Twilight* series Meyer creates the character Edward Cullen as a self-loathing, possessive, and selfish individual whose behavior frequently undermines the idea that his girlfriend Bella Swan can take care of herself or ever make informed and valid decisions. Edward's decisions always take precedence over Bella's, despite Edward's frequent reference to his existence as a monster. Even though Edward does not think highly of himself, he thinks less of Bella, at least according to his actions, even speaking to her as though she were a child rather than a teenager. In fairness to the character of Edward, Meyer creates

Bella as a rather dependent character who clings to the men in her life for support (Edward, her father, her friend Jacob Black, and others). Her emotional, mental, and physical identity is identified by her roles as a woman within these men's lives, and she plans her existence around that of Edward.

In contrast to Bella, the relationships between Buffy and other vampires serve to empower her as a woman. Vampires, a fierce and physically intimidating class of monsters, present very little challenge to Buffy who often outwits the creatures as well as physically overpowers them. Buffy serves as Bella's polar opposite. Unlike Bella, Buffy does not require rescuing from dangers. Where Bella finds her identity and gender role defined by her relationship with her vampire boyfriend, Buffy defines her own role as a woman by her ability to overcome the mental and physical abilities of the vampires surrounding her.

The vampires inspired by Charlaine Harris serve as vehicles for several different controversial topics: violence, civil rights, and drug use. Here, vampires constantly face the danger of kidnap, torture, and death brought on from either the intolerance of the humans that live in the same area or from members of society looking to drain vampires of their blood in order to turn a profit from the selling of an illegal substance. The first season of *True Blood* portrays several instances of this hatred of vampires, both of which encompass two of the controversial topics.

One such instance involves the vampire Bill Compton getting kidnapped and subdued by two humans who attempt to drain him of his blood, and therefore kill him, in an effort to obtain his blood to sell on the drug market. In order to accomplish this, the two humans place silver on Bill's skin, paralyzing him. A second instance, a multi-episode event, portrays two humans capturing a friendly and non-threatening vampire named Eddie, and keeping in their home for several days. During this time, the humans frequently withdraw blood from Eddie, starve him, physically abuse him, and ultimately kill him.²⁹ Both instances became public in one form or the other, and yet no governmental agency ever involved itself in the punishment of the humans responsible. Any punishment received came from other sources.

Vampires who choose to go mainstream within Harris's world find their decision difficult on both sides. Other vampires do not support any decision to abandon the pre-coming out lifestyle, often responding with violence and other results of their displeasure. Many humans also react violently against mainstreaming vampires. Bill Compton experienced a similar two-sided protest. After deciding to enter a bar in order to purchase a bottle of synthetic blood, Bill finds that many of the servers refuse to serve him because he is a vampire, similar to the treatment that many minorities still experience in the United States. Later in the series, a few humans burn Bill's house down in an effort to kill him and other vampires. Within some of the same episodes, Bill receives criticism from his vampire friends for choosing to mainstream. In an effort to sway him back, they threaten violence against him and humans he has grown fond of. Later on, Bill makes the choice to falsify abandoning his human lover Sookie to appease his vampire friends.³⁰

²⁹ *True Blood*. "Sparks Fly Out." HBO. 2008.

³⁰ *True Blood*. HBO. 2008.

Religion, another controversial issue, appears in newer vampire myths as well. Many new vampire myths do not stress religious observance. As discussed in the primary research, older vampires within *Buffy* more frequently observe religious practices while younger vampires do not. Recalling the thoughts of Spike, many younger vampires find that religion has no place within the existences of vampires since most of the practices do little or nothing for the practical purposes of feeding and survival. Similarly, Edward Cullen from *Twilight* does not believe that vampires have souls and finds it difficult to believe in an afterlife of some kind. His surrogate father, an older vampire name Carlisle, believes that vampires do own souls and can achieve salvation or damnation in the same way that humans can. This resembles a growing trend in American society that shows that the past several decades have marked a decline in religious practices and observances among adults and children.

Vampire fiction and mythology, a historically popular genre, continues to thrive despite drastic changes within the genre in the past forty years. Vampires in these works of fiction transitioned from mindless, soulless, and monstrous creatures into creatures possessing a conscience and having the ability to make choices between good and evil. These changes become obvious after studying modernized vampires in works of fiction such as Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* which began the transition from traditional to modernized vampire while also allowing for a return to homosexuality among vampires. Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, two different vampire fictions, serve that transition by following the abandonment of religious practices and beliefs in the United States while also promoting gender equality. Charlaine Harris's vampire books add to the transition by highlighting problems with race relations and civil rights, drugs, and violence among individual over uncontrollable difference among individuals. Stephanie Meyer provides a challenge to the achievements of Buffy in her portrayal of the human-vampire relationship within *Twilight*. The real transition of these stories does not refer only to the differences in vampire appearance and behavior, but also on the purpose of their creation, and their creation exists, at least in part, to reflect the problems and concerns within a society.

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