

## Vampires: From Black and White to Shades of Humanity

His thirsts have not changed. He craves the taste of blood, the warm, life-sustaining liquid that flows so gently from the necks of his victims into his own foul mouth. He continues to hunt in the night, cursed forever from the purity of sunlight, and his immortal body still remains ageless, untouched by the rugged sands of time and trauma. Yet somehow the vampire is different than he once was. He is richer, more human in color. His clothes are no longer binding and elaborate as the capes and suits of old; he often opts for simple denim or leather pants and coats. In fact, the modern vampire can often be mistaken for any other man or woman out for a midnight stroll. These observations all show evidence of the humanization of vampires in pop culture, an evolution from the soulless, purely evil animals they once were to merely darker versions of man. As humans struggle to control their own inner desires under the burden of society, increasingly protagonist vampires question and fight to suppress their own dark thirsts. It is this denial of nature unknown to the strictly evil vampires of old that identifies the modern-day film vampires more closely with their human counterparts today.

Vampires, in retrospect, weren't always the socially in-tune creatures that they are today. For what reasons did these changes occur? According to social critic Jarvie, 'if we look again at the movie past . . . we find that the critical posture, the portrayal of society, has long been an important sub tradition of the American cinema'<sup>1</sup>. Thus, if we refer back to some of the earliest vampire films, we might receive some clues about the nature of the society that birthed them. Once the context is recognized and we can see the differences between the past and present depictions of this fabled monster, it will be that much easier to speculate as to why they differ.

In the recollection of classic vampire films, two major works come to mind: Murnau's Nosferatu (1922) and Browning's Dracula (1931), both noticeably different adaptations of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel Dracula. The earlier of the two, Nosferatu, undoubtedly contains the fiercer, more animalistic portrayal of Count Orlock. This is evident in actor Max Shrek's dark-coated costume and makeup, which "[resemble] a giant bat with an oversized cranium, sunken eyes," and "a beak nose set above long crooked teeth"<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult to imagine an audience feeling any kind of sympathy toward this stiff-shouldered boogeyman who feeds on the living. Other than the basic shape of his pale, gnarled form, he contains few identifiable human characteristics.

Orlock's attempted reincarnation as Count Dracula in Browning's film nine years later still projects a cold stiffness in posture and emotion, yet appears very much more human in form. While his black suit and cape may be uncomfortably formal, his hair may be a little too slick and black, and his complexion may be a little fair, it is obvious that Bela Lugosi looks much more like an ordinary man than his skeletal predecessor. In fact, as Shrek presents an image of fear, perhaps even disgust, Lugosi is commonly seen as 'a tremendously sensual man who renewed the notion of the vampire as a romantic, almost erotic figure'<sup>3</sup>. In using attraction instead of repulsion as a key emotion, Browning's film allows viewers to sympathize with its characters' difficulties in rejecting the monster that plagues them. After all, being as alluring as Dracula can't be that bad, right?

Wrong. As it turns out, Dracula's actions in the 1931 horror flick are not any less bestial in light of his improved appearance, an illusion equated with the temptation of 'Original Sin'<sup>4</sup>. He kills and manipulates humans for his own benefit, and often. Renfield, a young man who comes to the Count's castle on business is turned into his own personal blood slave. Bound for England, Dracula then consumes the entire crew of the Vesta in selfish hunger. Finally, toward the end of the film the vampire is determined to add the beautiful Mina to his collection of bloodthirsty wives even though she is engaged to be married to another man. Although the vampire being improves in mannerism and appearance in the time span between these two films, the overall ugliness of his nature does not. He is seen in both representations as ultimately Evil, a contradiction to the Good that includes morality and social acceptance.

There is no doubt in either of these early films that this Evil must be stopped by an outside opposing force. Every story needs conflict, and the inner battles of the vampire absent in Dracula and Nosferatu (possibly because of the fact that these two never existed in human form) must therefore be substituted with a physical competition between an evildoer and a slayer. In essence, it is this external battle between Good and Evil alone that categorizes these films as distinct from those that followed.

The series of vampire flicks that sprang up in the late fifties and sixties through Hammer Studios may have continued this same overall theme of good vs. bad, but the fight was 'no longer so black and white'<sup>5</sup>. In fact, it was in colour. To many, this

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<sup>1</sup> Jarvie, Movies as Social Criticism, pg.xiii

<sup>2</sup> Ursini, J, The Vampire Film, pg.63

<sup>3</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.18

<sup>4</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.viii

<sup>5</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.21

visual change 'increased the realism of the productions . . .vampires with blood-streaked fangs . . .and the richly colored tones of the sets create a mood of unsettling actuality'<sup>6</sup>. Vampires and their bloody victims could be seen in vibrant color, slowly blurring the line between real-life and their big-screen appearance. With the emergence of a more realistic, colored world beyond the lens came the transition from black-and-white battles of right and wrong, the 'clinical version of the cosmic battle between Good and Evil to a grayer hue of what was seen as acceptable in society'<sup>7</sup>. One such example can be seen in the 1958 release of Horror of Dracula, in which, according to Day, Dracula 'is much more human because he is vulnerable . . . when he thinks Harker will be able to stake him . . . we see fear in his face'<sup>8</sup>. Among other changes brought about by the series of Hammer films was the fact that the vampires themselves seemed to be developing emotions similar to their human victims, an almost unthinkable context when compared to that of Nosferatu.

In conjunction with the movement toward more realistic villains came the emergence of the vampire as a more sensual being. Over thirty years since the release of Dracula, the 'boundaries of film representation of violence and sexuality had been pushed much further than ever before'<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the fact that Horror of Dracula is also more 'sexually explicit than earlier films is only a natural afterthought'<sup>10</sup>. According to Ursini and Silver, 'Many things left implicit in . . . [Dracula] or diluted in order to satisfy the needs of censorship surfaced, and the psycho-sexual aspects of the vampire were explored to an unprecedented depth.'<sup>11</sup>

This basic marriage of lust and evil can be tied into the earlier conception of the vampire's submission to desire as Original Sin. In abandoning these traditional 'black and white' concepts, the Hammer films created ambiguity in their classification of the inner nature of human beings<sup>12</sup>. Without the former clear-cut ideas of what was morally right and wrong, neither vampire nor human nature could be catalogued as truly Good or Evil. Thus, the resulting feeling of the audience toward each character---slayer, victim, or vampire---became a matter of the characters' actions over their natures.

Influence of the Hammer series' depiction of a more human vampire can be seen in more recent movies of the same genre. In The Lost Boys (1987), the main character played by Jason Patric does not realize that the new guys he has been having fun with are all members of the undead until he is turned into one himself. They appear to be nothing more than any other group of rebellious teenagers at first; they have normal-toned flesh, dark biker clothes rather than the traditional suit-and-cape ensemble, and---most definitely---no visible fangs, claws, or pointed ears. However, these temporary physical attributes do not hold constant throughout the film. Unlike previous vampire movies in which the immortals always remain true to their form (except for an occasional metamorphosis into a wolf or winged rodent), these bloodsuckers readily change back and forth between 'human' and 'vampire' facades. Though their human sides may be convincing, the vampire manifestations---complete with sharp teeth, wild eyes, and claw like feet---reveal the demonic presence that hides continually just below the surface.

The duality of the Lost Boys in their human and vampire sides presents an even more modern twist to the evolution of the film genre. The group's everyday behaviors reflect those of any other young group of individuals lacking parental control: wild, rebellious, and daring, but not inherently Evil as those of the race that preceded them. However, when the ugly sides of these unbridled adolescents do emerge---as in the scenes where Sam and the Frog brothers invade the vampire lair uninvited---there appears to be no end to their fury. These vampires truly are wolves in sheep's clothing.

In conjunction with the dualistic themes, the emergence of vampiric beings as the film's protagonists makes The Lost Boys an experimental success in its genre. In his efforts to impress Star, the sole female of the group, Michael drinks from a bottle of what he later discovers to be human blood during their cave party. Through this symbolic action, he has unknowingly begun the process of transformation into a vampire being, a 'metamorphosis [that] is implicitly what he desires'<sup>13</sup>. His near-complete change into one of the immortal gang is reversed when the "head" vampire is killed in the end. However the mere fact that a character with whom the audience identifies most begins the transformation of species by choice shows evidence of growing sympathy for vampires as a whole.

One possible reason for the film's success in making a monster out of Michael lies in the fact that he is given a choice whether or not to kill. Since he remains a half-vampire until this first kill is committed, the character stays in a kind of limbo between humanity and its darker side before the final action determines his fate. It is this choice, a choice never given to

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<sup>6</sup> Ursini, J, The Vampire Film, pg.124

<sup>7</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.25

<sup>8</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.24

<sup>9</sup> Jarvie, Movies as Social Criticism, pg.xiv

<sup>10</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.21-22

<sup>11</sup> Ursini, J, The Vampire Film, pp.123-4

<sup>12</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.3

<sup>13</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.29

Dracula's victims, that shows up often in later vampire films. Choice is what finally allows them to '[become] the protagonists of their own stories; vampire slayers, who were the real object of attention in Dracula, [are] eclipsed'<sup>14</sup>

In opposition to the progress made by vampires in The Lost Boys, Buffy the Vampire Slayer reverted the genre back toward a more traditional depiction of the undead in 1992. Though the creatures wear modern clothes and look human for the most part, they exhibit a selfish, animal-like hunger and a lack of visible sympathetic emotion. During one particular scene, Pike (Luke Perry)'s good friend who has recently been turned into a vampire floats effortlessly outside his window, begging to be let in because he's "hungry." The thought that he would choose to drink the blood of his former friend to satisfy his own thirst puts this vampire's character on a much lower level than that of The Lost Boys, who at least show a mutual respect among members of their group. Similarly, the idea that Buffy has been deemed the "slayer" by some greater power appears to reinstate the former ideas of Good and Evil as supreme forces in physical battle. So how did the vampires' evolution continue forward after this significant loss of ground?

As Buffy journeyed from the movie screen and onto television less than a decade after its release, it ended up regaining more than a few strides for the vampire cause. Appearing early on in the show's seven season stretch is Angel: a vampire with a soul. Unlike the others of his kind that are driven to drink blood with no conscious repercussions, he feels and experiences emotions just as humans do. This technicality allows him (followed by more than one other well-intentioned vampire in later seasons) to eventually join the cast in their fight against evil. Although, like Michael of The Lost Boys, he still has the cravings to drink the blood of mortals as any other vampire, conscious choice prevents him from doing so. He is thus cursed with the conflicting emotions of a protagonist and identified as a kindred spirit because of his sensitive, human qualities.

Much of Buffy's success in presenting Angel as a sympathetic protagonist is paralleled in two fairly recent releases: Anne Rice's Interview With the Vampire (1994) and Queen of the Damned (2002). Both commence with darkly intoxicating narration by members of the undead who have become disillusioned to the seemingly romantic aspects of immortality after living for so long in tragic solitude. Louis, in Interview With the Vampire, experiences the loss of not only his wife and infant child in childbirth, he lives through the murder of his vampire-daughter Claudia and the partial-death of the vampire who created him. The apparent love that Louis experiences toward these others, pure love being the antithesis of traditionally Evil qualities of Orlock and Dracula, illustrates in him the most entirely human qualities that can be experienced.

The feeling of love that works to make Louis a "human" vampire in Interview is what ultimately transforms the protagonist vampire Lestat in Queen of the Damned from an individual selfishly drawn into his own desires to hero-like status. Opening the film in a dark crypt, he remarks in a smooth, flowing accent:

*"There comes a time for every vampire when the idea of eternity becomes momentarily unbearable. Living in the shadows...feeding in the darkness with only your own company to keep...rots into a solitary, hollow existence. Immortality seems like a good idea...until you realize you're going to spend it alone."*

Like Louis, he expresses his feeling that his immortal body is merely a curse that brings pain and suffering into his life. Though following scenes of the film portray the self-centered aspects of his personality---feeding on young women who admire his music, his pursuit of companions despite unfortunate consequences to his fellow vampires---it is his love for a human woman that in the end causes him to sacrifice the eternal companionship of Akasha, the queen vampire, and his position as her king. In this instance it becomes clear that the external battles of Good and Evil between slayer and soulless creature have become virtually obsolete, as the struggle of 'Rice's lonely and damned vampires' remains entirely within themselves'<sup>15</sup>.

Most recently, the idea of the vampire's sacrifice of self for mortal love as seen by Lestat was furthered in the 2003 release of Underworld. As Selene, a member of an ancient vampire bloodline in an endless battle with the Lycans, actress Kate Beckinsale finds herself drawn toward Scott Speedman's mortal character. In order to save this man from the gang of hostile werewolves who appear to be pursuing him, Selene risks her own life and familial bond by disobeying the orders of her vampire leaders. In forgoing her own needs as a vampire, Selene's actions prove that films of the vampire genre have indeed come full circle; where Nosferatu and Dracula used the sacrifice of human lives for their own gain, protagonist vampires such as Lestat and Selene sacrifice their own wants and needs for the lives of the humans they love.

In the past century, the basic distinction of vampires as a race of bloodsucking night dwellers has not changed much. They are still dark, they are still seductively mysterious, and they still live the unnaturally long lives of immortals. Yet, the

<sup>14</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.2

<sup>15</sup> Day, W P, Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture, pg.43

emotional and physical attributes of the vampires as a race have become almost synonymous with those of humans. They have come to look like us, sound like us, and most importantly, feel like us. Does this signify something?

Vampire films, as with movies of all genres, are no more than 'a reflection of the society that creates them'<sup>16</sup>. Movies only change as we change. The growing diversity of American society undoubtedly has played a role in this process, as people are more apt to examine alternate lifestyles before condemning them today than in the past. Traditional definitions of good and evil have long been abandoned, replaced by a more intermediate array of gray area in between the two black-and-white extremes. Imitating this concept through the vampire genre has worked to keep it alive in a society that has become more demanding of its movies as an art that coincides with reality. Most people presently recognize that all humans have inappropriate desires and urges that must be restrained or at least kept under control in order to function in everyday life. More of these compulsions are understood as common today than in the days of Dracula, when his character was seen as evil for merely having the nature rather than his choice to pursue it. As Benjamin Hoff remarks in the Tao of Pooh, 'when you know and respect your own Inner Nature, you know where you belong'<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps, in modeling what were once seen as beasts after us, we are learning to accept rather than shun our own primitive natures. Our place in the world is as creatures that are human.

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### Referencing Procedures

1. All book and film titles are Underlined
2. The first time a film text is mentioned its (release date) needs to be included in Parenthesis
3. Never refer to an actor, director, author, critic etc by their first name – surnames only please
4. Footnotes<sup>18</sup> should be used every time a secondary source is referred to. 'Single' quotation marks should also be used to indicate which words have been used/paraphrased.
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6. If a quotation from a film is being used it should be indicated by using "double" quotation marks as well as being *italicized*
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<sup>16</sup> Jarvie, Movies and Society, pg.197

<sup>17</sup> Hoff, B, The Tao of Pooh, pg.41