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Everyman with Fangs: **The Acceptance of the Modern Vampire**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The vampire, an enduring demon from the European middle ages has through the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century undergone a journey of transformation. The journey of the beast describes a circle, starting and ending with the depiction of the vampire as a soulless, evil killing machine. From the Middle Ages, moving into the 18<sup>th</sup> century the vampire slowly becomes more sophisticated, becoming first Varney, then Dracula, then in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the accepted and understood Vampires Louis and Lestat. From there the vampire is found in television, theatre and cinema in such films as Fright Night, Blade, and The Lost Boys. Finally with the appearance of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the vampire becomes once again everyman with fangs and the circular journey began in the European Middle Ages has been completed.

Joyce: “*Oh my God, its Mr Sanderson from the bank*”

Gingerbread 3011<sup>1</sup>

The above quote from Joyce is found in the prologue to *Gingerbread, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 3011 and is uttered by Joyce upon seeing the vampire that Buffy is fighting. The statement, although registering surprise that the vampire in question is known to her, displays no real shock or horror that someone as mundane as the local banker can become a vampire. That members of the commercial professions, and commercial institutions are easily accepted as vampires and their places of work seen as places of evil, is a thematic thread within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Not only is Sunnydale, California, on the Hellmouth and thus the instances of vampirism encountered by the citizens considered normal, but the wider Californian society appears to be a happy hunting ground for vampires. Take for example the setting of *Angel*, appropriately and cynically set in the City of Angels and the lyrics from the Tom Petty Song Free falling, “*All the vampires walkin' through the valley'/Move west down Ventura Boulevard/And all the bad boys are standing in the shadows*” point to a possibility that the popular acceptance of the vampire, in California at least, could be seen as, in effect, everyman in that they could be anybody. The embracement by popular culture that the Vampire can be anyone is an identifiable aspect of the modern vampire. That the modern vampire can be seen as everyman is the thesis of this article. Like everyman the vampires within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have lost everything, even good deeds. That is, all the vampires except *Angel*, and to a certain extent *Spike*. Like the marketer’s illusion of everyman or everywoman the vampire, and its gothic realm, has also become a niche market, the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* are two examples of the commoditisation of the modern vampire. The intent of this article is to utilise the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a vehicle to illustrate the changing nature and acceptance, of the modern vampire.

It is with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that the vampire as a horrific icon has not only gained acceptance but has also completed the final chapter in a cycle that began in the middle ages. The acceptance of the vampire which has enabled a clearly defined niche within the

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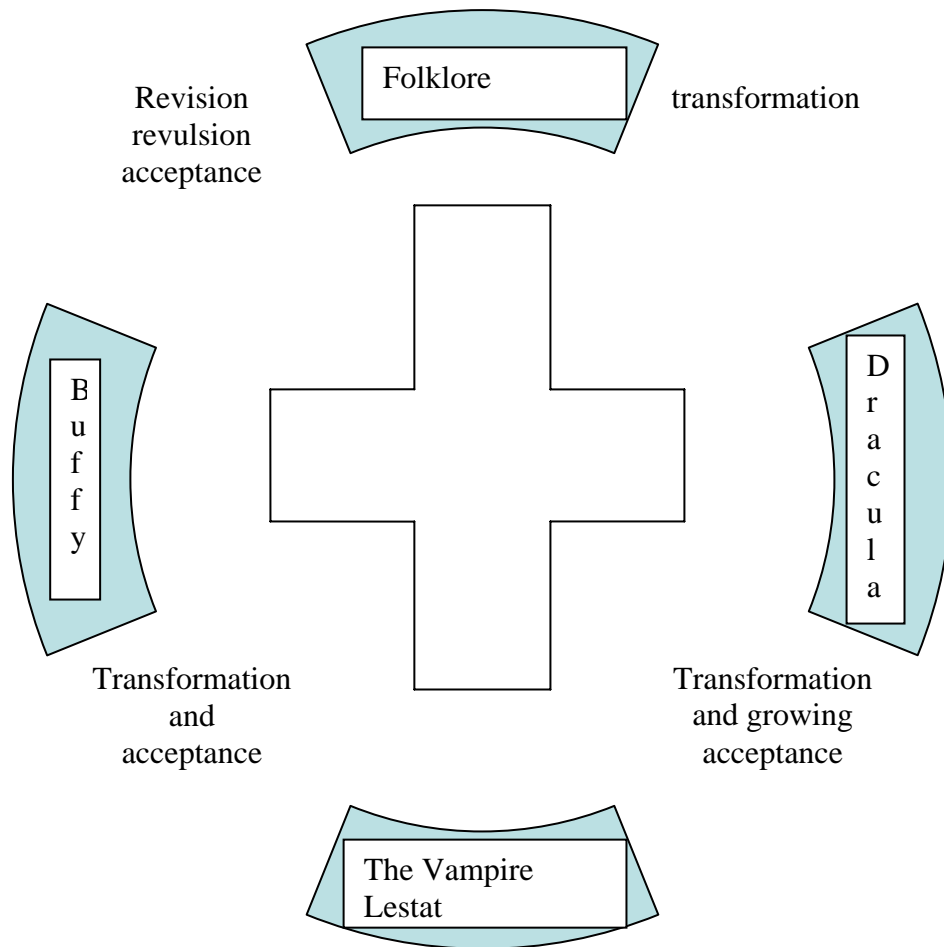
<sup>1</sup> Buffy The Vampire Slayer season three episode 11, prologue. Air date 12 Jan 1999. All references to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, (BtVS) will follow the convention adopted within the on line journal of Slayage, [www.slayage.tv](http://www.slayage.tv), in that the season comes first followed by the episode number.

gothic tradition began with peasant tales of demonic, soulless resurrections. It is from that early peasant beginning of a spirit wronged, arisen to wreck havoc upon the village or family that wronged them that we get the horrific beast without mercy or soul. The vampire appears as a dark, empty, evil and completely alien killing machine. This tale of the vampire stalked Europe almost unnoticed until the advent of the gothic novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. With the publication in 1764 by Horatio Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A gothic Story*, by a new genre had arisen. Although Walpole did not write of vampires he had however established the environment from which the vampire could be resurrected in popular consciousness. It did not take long before the first vampire was chronicled. There is some debate surrounding the first modern vampire; however it is clear that Bram Stoker's *Dracula* published in 1897 was not the first, for example the most influential vampire narrative that introduced the modern vampire was the publication by Byron of "the Giaor" in 1813, (Skal, 14). Although Goethe is credited by Skal, (14) of introducing the romantic vampire it is the efforts of the English Lord Byron that led to the popular representations of vampires. The development by Byron of the modern romantic vampire gave rise to novels, poetry and plays. For example, *Carmilla* (1872), *Varney the Vampyre or The Feast of Blood* (1847), *le Vampire*, (1820) and *The Vampire*, (1852) all cited in the book *Hollywood Gothic* by David Skal, owe their genesis to the archetype of the romantic image of a vampire. By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there was a received wisdom concerning the social status, the look, and the habits of a vampire. With the publication of Bram Stokers *Dracula* that public impression was about to be cemented in the minds of the public. Further, the image that Stoker introduced was to set the mainstay of the vampire image for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The first turn on the wheel of transformation from horrific demon to acceptable icon of danger, male sexuality and popular horror had begun. As stated above, within this article I aim to illustrate how popular representations of the vampire have allowed interpretations of the vampire to come full circle and illustrate through examples of web sites, books, magazines, films, television and DVDs both the acceptance and commoditisation of the vampire.

The interpretations of *Dracula* gave rise throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a growing acceptance that the vampire was nothing more than a wronged and misunderstood unfortunate. The novels of Ann Rice, beginning with *Interview with a Vampire* were most instructional on this point. It is from *Interview with a Vampire* that films such as *The Lost Boys* were able to gain leverage. The progression from folklore demon to sophisticated empathic and accepted members of society was aided by mass media. It is the mass media, in the form of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that I argue has almost completed the circle. The

revision to pure evil, as represented in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has not however led to the unacceptability of the vampire. Rather the vampire while now being acknowledged as demonic and evil without human feelings, can still be anyone at anytime, the beast therefore can be, as in the middle ages, everyman with fangs.

An Illustration of the concept and the Iconic Stops, seen in a clockwise direction, within the vampire circle are illustrated below.



### THE EVOLUTION OF ACCEPTANCE: FROM DRACULA TO LESTAT

In tandem with the growing acceptance of the vampire as a gothic icon has been the associated embracement of the gothic theme. The dark brooding castles of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century imagination has during the later part of the 20th century given way to gothic music, vampire clubs, television shows and a host of websites devoted to a gothic lifestyle<sup>2</sup>. David Keyworth writing in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* suggests that it is the rise

<sup>2</sup> A search on Google utilizing the phrase “gothic lifestyle” returned 39,900 hits September 2006

of the gothic subculture that has led to the acceptance of the vampire in a modern society (Keyworth, 355). Such symbols of the acceptance of the vampire can be seen in theatrical antics of heavy metal performers such as Marilyn Mason, and Ozzy Osborne. Despite the use of gothic symbolism, horror iconography and embracement of the dark, adherents of heavy metal music will ironically enough, quickly disassociate themselves from the label gothic. How the vampires and their associated merchandise, clubs and modern folklore changed during the mid 20th century made it possible for Anne Rice to write *An Interview With a Vampire*, (1976) and by doing so completely reinvent the vampire as everyman. It is for that reason that Anne Rice and Lestat appear as a station within the Vampire Cross illustrated above.

However something happened to the vampire on his journey from 19<sup>th</sup> Century eastern European gentleman to 20th century horror icon. The most radical change was the almost universal portrayal of the vampire as male, to one where the vampire could be male or female, as evidenced within the books of Anne Rice. Part of the journey also included the changing *nature* of the vampire. Where the vampire was seen in the early 20th century as a demonic and evil force, by the last quarter of the 20th century the vampire was seen increasingly as a camp character. The vampire has become a character that was able to be portrayed in comedy; David Skal in his book *Hollywood Gothic* suggests that this happened as early as 1932 in film and 1966 on the stage (Skal 300 and 294). It is as if the beast is a villain no more. Not only that, the name and the image of Dracula had by the mid 1960s been utilised in everything from animated films, to popular posters, and had started to give rise to niche sub cultures with their own lurid magazines of the vampire (Skal, 252). By the year 2000 it was possible to see the portrayal of vampires in films as both heroes, and villains within the same programme, for example the vampire Blade, in the *Blade* series (1998, 2002, 2004) and on television Spike and Angel in *Angel* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* all conform to the heroic archetype as described by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell), while the other vampires we meet in these shows are evil, killing machines.

The legacy of Dracula taught us all well. The enduring image of Dracula is so powerful that he even appears as a suave sophisticated European gentleman in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer 5001, Buffy vs. Dracula*. The significant aspect of Dracula as he appears in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer 5001* is that he is most unlike the usual Buffy vampires. He is in all respects the popular incarnation of Dracula, although showing elements of an Anne Rice Makeover. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and media of that genre exist because of the enduring

image of Dracula. Robert Bulman suggests that films not only entertain, but also instruct (p. 7). It is through the instruction given by the numerous iterations of Dracula primarily through cinema that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century horror fan learned how a vampire behaves, what kills them and what makes them strong. It is through the various incarnations of Dracula films we obtain certain facts about vampires that were to become universal truths. These truths were not really countered until we meet Louis and the vampire Lestat through *An Interview with a Vampire*. Among these universal truths, that had become themselves folklore by the 1980s, were the belief in the Christian cross and garlic to ward off vampires, but only if the person wielding the cross had faith. We learned that they only sleep by day and they are killed only by a stake to the heart, sunlight or fire. Above all we have learned that they have friends, relatives, and lives to live and want to be part of a wider society. The modern vampire, as made popular by Anne Rice and in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by Joss Wheddon, walks by day, but in not in daylight, socialises, can be a sophisticated creature and is everyman with fangs.

#### **TRANSFORMATION AND ACCEPTANCE: FROM LESTAT TO SPIKE.**

The journey between being interviewed by a journalist with an eye on the big time, to being dusted on prime time television by a symbol of female emancipation has been arguably one of the most dynamic periods in the transformation and acceptance of the vampire. This transformation towards acceptance has been accompanied by unprecedented access to the vampires and their lairs through mass media, the most notable being the development and entrenchment of the internet. During this time the vampire became somehow even less other world than it was before and instead became for some, not just a demonic force for evil but a way of life, as evidenced by the large and increasing amount of “vampire lifestyle” pages on the internet.<sup>3</sup> The existence of vampire *lifestyle* poses an irony. This is an irony that appears to be lost on some of the adherents of modern vampirism. The journey of the vampire however, is a journey that ends in the beginning, for unlike the suave sophisticated gentlemen of old and two vampires we finally meet in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the vampires have been transformed once again into bloodsucking creatures of the night. How they arrived at such a place is the subject of the following section. The transformation of the dark from fringe to acceptance as Crane, Gelder, Skal and Bulman have all commented, has been one mediated through the cinema, television and internet. In doing so the vampire has become

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<sup>3</sup> A search on Google utilizing the phrase “vampire lifestyle” returned 4970 hits, 15 April 2005



hero, friend and finally villain. The vampire can be boys, men, women, and girls. Further, the mark of the vampire appears to cross religious, cultural, racial and economic boundaries. For some the metaphor of lifeblood has taken an even more dramatic turn and been replaced, as is appropriate in the modern, with life-force. Such a vampire is known as a psychic vampire and is, according to their adherents, a more pure form of vampirism. It is a vampire that feeds off the power of life rather than one which feeds only on the blood of its victim (Keyworth, 359). Erickson, notes that every age embraces the vampire it needs, (111) in such a context the notion of a psychic vampire starts to make sense. It could be that the vampires found within the realm of *Buffy Summers* have been invented as a reaction *against* the acceptance of the vampire within the world.

The novels of Anne Rice introduced the world to a post-modern vampire lore together with the notion that the vampire has a history and believes in the construct of community. The novels, starting with *Interview With a Vampire*, set us up to believe that the vampire had been misread. That it was a misunderstood unfortunate creature of circumstance. In short, the vampire needed our sympathy for its plight. The novels also imagined that like any community the vampires needed to grow, nurture, and expand their dominion. That they undertook such growth and expansion through murder was one which was not overlooked. Although the vampire became socialised, it was still a powerful, immortal demonic force in the world. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the theme of acceptance was expanded. Not only with the Anne Rice vampire chronicles but also through films such as *Fright Night* (1985) and *The Lost Boys* (1987), we are introduced to the normalcy of the vampire and how they exist parallel to our own existence. Further the power and sexual attraction of these creatures makes us, well at least some of us, believe that we want to be like them, to fight for them and stand up for their wronged lives. This is a theme that Ken Gelder addresses throughout chapters six and seven of his book *Reading the Vampire* (1994). It is also a theme that dominates the vampire lifestyle pages on the internet. With access to the ways of the vampire growing as a result of mass media it did not take long before the vampires were raised to the level of a demonic deity, complete with their own church “Vampire Church”<sup>4</sup>. From here the vampire gathered adherents and spread the word. By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Christian millennium it was possible to find references to vampire cults, dance clubs and fetishes throughout cyberspace. It is as if the cultists are substituting the horrors of the modern world with the more acceptable tame horrors of the gothic imagination. It is a world

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<sup>4</sup> Vampire Church [www.vampire-church.com](http://www.vampire-church.com)

where outcasts are accepted, and where the danger has been mitigated by imagination, a retreat from the reality of the modern world where conformity is still, to a certain extent rewarded and difference places oneself outside convention. For example the vampires can now be seen at once as being; homoerotic (Grey, 4), Heroic *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (7022 *Chosen*), horrific, as in how mastery of technology can produce horrific results, (South 95) and humorous (Boyette 1). Indeed throughout the 1990s vampires developed souls (Abbott 5) and became normalised, complete with unique and identifiable names (Money 105). Not only had they developed personal names and become normalised they had also developed a following in the form of various vampire cults.

Following Wheatley, the [vampire] cults found within modern gothic novels and the internet sites established to communicate amongst themselves could be seen in terms of extension of modern subcultures. Further the acceptance of such subcultures could be seen as part of living in the current society. Thus the vampire is seen by some as normal. In this respect those that adhere to the vampire could be considered as just another group of people looking for acceptance in an increasingly alienating social milieu (p. 92). The vampires found within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* stand testament to such an acceptance. At the end of season three of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the character Jonathan presents Buffy with a class protector award. As part of his introduction to the award he gives a speech in which he says to Buffy “We're proud to say that the Class of '99 has the lowest mortality rate of any graduating class in Sunnydale history” (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 3020 *The Prom*). There is a clear reference here that the graduating class of 1999 are not only aware of the slayer, but more importantly accept that vampires haunt their town and that in Sunnydale “walking anywhere after dark is like an extreme sport” (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 7019 *Empty Places*). Something happens to the vampires in the world in which the slayer lives. The vampires may be accepted, they may even have their own cult however they are on the whole unsophisticated, they do not on the whole engender sympathy, and they are brutal demonic killing machines. That is all except Angel and the ultimate gothic hero – Spike.

### **ACCEPTANCE OF THE VAMPIRE: THE RETURN TO THE GRAVE.**

With the arrival of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the vampire was once again transformed into a demon. From the mass appeal of *Dracula*, through the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century horror film and graphic novels, to the popular fiction of Anne Rice, and on to the accessible vampires of the late 20th Century the vampire had become an acceptable beast. The vampire had inspired loyalty and sympathy. The vampire had, it seemed, become everyman with

fangs. With the advent of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the nature of the beast reverted to its primal roots. From the very first episode – *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 1001, *Welcome to the Hellmouth* we are introduced to a monster. The Master is no sophisticated European gentleman instead he is a demon. He is a blood devouring, happy in his destruction demon. There is no real notion of family – even though he uses those words. The master’s history is one that has been built upon savagery and it sets the scene for the vampires we met through the series. The exceptions are Angel, a vampire with a soul, and Spike, who through medical intervention in series four and through finding his soul at the end of series six are rendered harmless to humans for a majority of the *Buffy* history. It is as if the acceptance of the vampire had become too much, and that their real nature needed to be once again uncovered and reinforced to a jaded society.

The vampires in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* could be read as metaphors for the dangers in modern society such as the fear associated in some people’s minds with difference and the danger of outcasts. The vampires represent the danger posed by social delinquents and how their destructive power could be harnessed by unscrupulous power brokers for the power brokers’ own ends. For example in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* *Glory*, The Master, The Mayor and Spike before rehabilitation, could all be read as characters that utilised demonic power for their own ends. However this concluding section intends to illustrate how the depiction of vampires within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has become more like the peasant incarnations of the vampire and less like the socially acceptable Blade, Lestat, and Louis.

The heading of this section – acceptance of the vampire – is a pointer that that the vampire is now seen as little more than a “serial killer with fangs” (Rutkowski 3) and that they are no longer a romantic figure. The acceptance of the vampire as a result of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does not therefore give the vampire the equivalent status of human which had been applied by Anne Rice. Rather the vampire is accepted as nothing more than an evil killing beast that does not require sympathy but only deserves destruction. The vampire has once again become “brutish demonic and hideous” (Keyworth 370). In becoming brutish demonic and hideous the *Buffy* vampires have become a monster that the peasant of the Middle Ages would recognise as a vampire. The beast has no soul and inspires revulsion in all that meet it. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* we have seen the final turn on the wheel that began in the mists of medieval Eastern Europe. We have seen that in the beginning the vampire was soulless, being revived to take vengeance upon those that harmed them during their life, a type of warning against the rejection of the Christian church. Then followed a long and protracted period of acceptance and rehabilitation of the vampire, where it was

accorded status and privilege, almost ending up without sympathy and empathy for its plight. Then in the final turn of the wheel we see a complete rejection of sympathy and an acceptance that the vampire is a demon. Once again, due to the influence of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the vampire can again be seen as everyman with fangs.

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