

Eat my flesh, drink my blood: Are vampires Jesus' evil twins?

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(RNS) It takes more than a theological stake to the heart to kill the vampire legend.

From Stephenie Meyer's Twilight books and films to the current HBO saga, "True Blood," fascination with these so-called creatures of the night permeates contemporary life.

So why is this mythic figure so long-lived and potent?

Sigmund Freud said vampires represent our repressed sexuality and aggression, while Carl Jung argued that they are a universal type of "shadow," or dark side of the human personality. They embody aspects of ourselves that we reject, hide or are ashamed to confront.

Many religious scholars see the vampire as a mirror of Christianity.

He is Christ's evil twin, stealing ideas and imagery from the faith's miraculous tale and twisting them into a sinister parable.

Jesus told his disciples to "eat my flesh and drink my blood" as evidence of their devotion to him and his mission. Jesus' words were controversial even among his hearers, and later Romans and other pagans accused the early Christians of cannibalism, says John Morehead of the Western Institute for Intercultural Studies in Salt Lake City.

Beyond blood, both Jesus and vampires offer immortality, admittedly through different paths.

"We can read the vampire -- and his status as having been alive, then dead and now undead -- as related to the Christian idea of resurrection from the dead," Morehead says.

These days, though, items such as the crucifix and holy water no longer repel the demon, Morehead says. The church is "just as powerless in the face of the vampire as any other institution."

We think we've outgrown superstition, but vampires still frighten -- and attract -- us.

No one knows for certain the origins of vampires, but most scholars trace the roots to 16th century Slavic nations, where townsfolk believed in a cosmic battle between good and evil gods, one associated with light, the other with darkness. Like villagers everywhere, they were wary of strangers and outsiders.

When the Eastern Orthodox Church came into power, it was threatened by pagans and heretics. Eventually, these Christians would identify many non-Christians -- including pagans and Jews -- as "vampires."

Both outsider groups were accused of drinking blood because of their ritual animal sacrifices, says Joseph Laycock, who teaches a class on vampires at Tufts University in Boston. "The only blood they were supposed to drink was Christ's."

Any unexplained illness, injury or death often was blamed on the dead returning to harm the living. Vampires became the region's scapegoats.

Britain's Lord Byron traveled to Greece and Turkey and came back to write macabre poems. By 1816, he produced the first modern vampire story. In his telling, the vampire was not a rotting corpse. Still evil, but rich and sexy.

The vampire he drew, Laycock says, resembled Byron himself -- a womanizer and an embarrassment to the family.

That marked the beginning of the seductive, but sympathetic vampire who is the father of the television show, "Dark Shadows," in the 1960s, followed by Anne Rice's "Interview With the Vampire," and finally Meyer's Edward Cullen.

Cullen, a desirable and tortured protagonist, created by Meyer, a Mormon and graduate of Brigham Young University, is a far cry from Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Ironically, a century ago Mormon missionaries were pictured more like Dracula than Cullen.

In 1911, about 15 years after Stoker wrote his tale of the blood-sucking Transylvanian count, British writer Winifred Graham published "The Love Story of a Mormon," which later was made into the silent flick, "Trapped by the Mormons."

The lurid tale featured a Utah Mormon missionary who arrives in England to win converts to his clan. He uses superhuman powers to persuade a young woman to join his church and leave her fiancé. As evidence of his power, he supposedly raises a person from the dead. It all fit within the anti-Mormonism of the era, according to James D'Arc, curator of Brigham Young University's arts and communications archive.

"A common trait in Victorian-era anti-Mormon literature was `the sexual magnetism of the Mormon male, and the hypnotized passivity of his innocent victim,'" D'Arc argues in an article reprinted on the website patheos.com.

When Dracula kissed his victims, he literally sucked the lifeblood out of them. The transfer of blood changed their identities and personalities, he writes. Graham believed LDS missionaries did the same to their female converts.

Like early Mormons, Dracula was polygamous, moving from woman to woman, and both vampires and Latter-day Saints promised eternal life.

Living in a Romanian village or a British suburb, lives were relatively simple and prescribed by circumstance. The vampire offered a cautionary tale of what would happen to those who dabbled in forbidden relationships. Such stories kept people in check.

Contemporary vampire tales reflect a different reality, says Laycock, author of "Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampirism."

"If you grow up in America, you have no idea where you are going to live, do or be," he says. "We have existential questions, ancient people never had. We have more choices but our choices are isolating. We all feel like outcasts sometimes, too."

Many Americans, particularly young people, perceive worship as boring. They won't sit still for lectures on good and evil from the pulpit, preferring instead a vague and nondemanding spirituality.

Still, they are attracted to stories about supernatural creatures. In a twisted way, these yarns offer hope for something more than this life.

Vampire stories, Morehead says, can serve as a vehicle for the exploration of the imagination, a discussion of good and evil, and a playful chance to "wrestle with religious and spiritual questions."