

# TELEVISED UNDEAD: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF VAMPIRES IN CONTEMPORARY TV SHOWS.

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## Abstract

Drawing on a rich literary tradition, Gothic novels display strange and unreal places such as castles and secret passages where dramatic and amazing events occur and whose effects feeds on an appealing sort of terror. This literary genre expresses an appreciation of extreme passions and emotions and a “longing for” supernatural atmospheres and desolated settings often peopled by monsters, ghosts and vampires. The Gothic fiction has received much fortune throughout the years and, in the contemporary context, it has also been adapted to visual and audiovisual products as a consequence of the people’s need to combine the real with the fantastic and transgressions with rules. The word transgression contains in itself a clear reference to the concept of “breaking the boundaries” (trans), going beyond the ordinary life. Seen through this perspective, vampires possess an evocative strength that aptly expresses men’s contemporary quest for “life after death”; indeed, as Bruhm (2002) points out, “the Gothic provides us a guarantee of life even in the face of so much death” (274). As a matter of fact, in twentieth century films and TV shows vampires and blood-sucking creatures undergo a process of humanization that makes them more “accessible”. This article aims at analyzing the relationship between the Gothic genre and audiovisual products through an interdisciplinary approach that, on the one hand, tracks back the features of this literary genre and accommodates them to present-day necessities and, on the other hand, analyzes the main changes it has encompassed.

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**Keywords:** New gothic genre, vampires, television

*“With Coppola’s “Dracula”, then, Gothic died, divested of its excesses, of its transgressions, horrors and diabolical laughter, of its brilliant gloom and rich darkness, of its artificial and suggestive forms. Dying, of course, might just be the prelude to other spectral returns.”*  
(Botting 1996:134.)

## Introduction:

As Hogle (2002) points out, the Gothic genre has generally shown relatively constant features since its very beginning, and some of them can contribute to portray a common threat within the entire artistic production. Sinister and solitary places, such as abandoned castles, ruined abbeys or dark graveyards have always been the chosen places by the protagonists of the stories: ghosts, spectres, vampires and monsters, whose physical peculiarities and contingent psychological characteristics have undoubtedly changed and moulded throughout

the centuries. From its “official” origins in 1899<sup>278</sup>, indeed, the term “Gothic” aims at including every literary, visual and even audiovisual product, whose main goal is to “fit the needs of the period in which it is exploited” (Hurley 2002: 193). However, although the use of the term in literature has roots at the beginning of the previous century, the genesis and the development of this literary genre must be traced back to 1764, when Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* became extremely popular, fascinating readers with its macabre, mysterious and supernatural intertwined elements. As the author himself explained in the preface to the second edition of his novel, indeed, he intended to combine the fantastic and the real, the imaginative quality of the old medieval romances and the realistic imprint of the rational Augustan works. With his novel, indeed, he epitomised the typical features of the gothic fiction with his creative imagination and through the exploitation of conventional medieval portrayals, whose main representations were linked to “catastrophic pestilences, martyrdom, religious terror, sadistic criminality, public torture, and execution” (Morgan 2002: 41). Since the end of the eighteenth century every novel included in the so-called *gothic* dimension presented the interest in non-rational experiences, elements of horror and in the devastating power of nature that took inspiration from the theory of the sublime suggested by Edmund Burke in 1756<sup>279</sup>. According to him, the individual had virtually limitless potential, and terror was one of the ways of realizing some of that potential: as a matter of fact, the new concept could be seen as the answer to the increasing disillusionment with the Enlightenment and provoked the rejection of the constraints and limits imposed by the Augustan socio-cultural panorama. In the light of these observations, breaking the rules between what is commonly accepted as rational and what is generally considered as irrational, and therefore incomprehensible, is one of the main goals of gothic artists.

In fact, what made and still makes the gothic genre unique and striking is the endless “oscillation between earthly laws and possibilities of the supernatural” (Hogle 2002: 2): gothic products, both early famous literary masterpieces and more recent feature films and TV shows, always deal with transgression, that “signifies a writing of excess” (Botting 1996: 6). Yet Mary Shelley, as the other writers of the Romantic period, aimed at challenging the society in which they lived, promoting a new kind of world, where the awareness of the *unknown* was seen as a transgressing response to the fixed and pre-set principles of the English middle-upper class of the first part of the nineteenth century. Novels defined as gothic, tended to represent what Kavka (2002), taking into consideration more recent films and TV series, defines as the “permeable and uncertain boundary between the human and nonhuman” (210): the role that this fictional genre has always played within European society is to question the presence of mankind and its conventional rules, making readers and viewers think of the possible diversities included in the world as men are used to know and experience it. In regard to this aspect, Hogle (2002) posits that “the longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural” (4), explaining that the fortune of gothic current is due to the artists’ ability to shape their works according to the needs of people around them.

Moreover, the philosophical enquiries of the twentieth century have contributed to see gothic fiction as a way to face and challenge both social and individual obsessions, making them sink in a deformed reality in which things can be perceived in a misshaped form. Demolishing or negotiating the socio-cultural anxieties of the modernist and post-modernist period seems, in fact, to be the essential task of the gothic genre, whose most illustrious artists

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<sup>278</sup> E.J. Clery, “The genesis of “Gothic” fiction” in *Gothic Fiction*, (p. 21). Given the fact that the first critics using the term *Gothic* were Henry A. Beers and Wilbur Cross in 1899, the author suggests that the word essentially belongs to the twentieth century.

<sup>279</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1990 [1756]).

take inspiration from the Freudian theory of the “return” of the repressed. Irrational feelings, unconventional passions, fanciful inclinations and any kind of vices condemned by the society find room in the avatar offered by the gothic dimension: its quintessence is to undermine the traditional stereotypes associated with the conventional oppositions between good and evil, reason and passion, real and fantastic and virtues and vices. Therefore, defined by Hurley (2002: 194) “a cyclical genre”, gothic generally reflects what the society in the period in which it is exploited is and the manifold fears persecuting individuals.

- In regard to this aspect, yet from the modernist age such analysis also aims at shedding light on the human need to find a place to the category called “the others” (ibid.: 197), in which any individual not respecting the conventional social rules can be grouped. Gothic always leaves room to any kind of human subjectivity, giving birth to a constellation of multifaceted identities, whose common threat seems to be the need to face reality.

### **Gothic in the twentieth-one century**

As an inevitable consequence to this elasticity, the mutual dependence is clear: gothic fiction is the mirror of the society in which it is produced, but it is also the spontaneous product of people to whom it is intended. Just in light of these considerations, the contemporary gothic, perhaps unlike the role it played in the previous centuries, has gained a redeeming function, in fact, as Bruhm (2002) points out, “the Gothic provides us a guarantee of life even in the face of so much death” (274). In the contemporary world, indeed, people are bombarded with information about violent crimes every day. This climate of constant fear obviously negatively affects any individual’s life, perceiving the uncertainty and the subsequent perpetual insecurity of the human presence. In fact, as explained by Bruhm, “contemporary life always reminds us that we are moving towards death, or at least obsolescence, and that life we must continually strive to hold together” (ibid.). Therefore, what seems more likely is the fact that people see in the gothic characters a way to escape reality and, above all, to escape death. The traditional figures taking part in the gothic dimension, such as werewolves, monsters, ghosts and vampires, tend to be considered by the contemporary society a possible way to keep going on existing. At this point, once human longing for “something” different has been satisfied, the mechanism of identification with the “other” begins: the loss of human identity and the alienation of the self, Botting (1996) clarifies, implies a complex process through which the person tries to find his/her avatar in that cosmos in which conventional boundaries have disappeared (108). The codification of a new world, whose main parameters are the supernatural, the unknown and the darkness, can help common people to detach themselves from their daily fears to enter a confused dimension, whose spatial and temporal coordinates are completely subjective. Good and evil are not clear concepts anymore, and rational and irrational melt to create an intermingled architecture where any limit of transgression is neutralized.

Since the therapeutic function of the gothic fiction has been revealed, the incessant search for another individuality within the self becomes one of the first needs readers and viewers viscerally meet. They tend to identify themselves in the living-dead characters offered by the literary or audiovisual gothic products, aiming at forgetting their human condition and capturing the idea of eternity. Gothic figures, indeed, although they can be killed, present many characteristics which make them to be essentially immortal. They are strong, cunning, insensitive to human sufferings and impermeable to social pre-set values.

To this regard, as Botting highlights, “otherness takes center stage: sexual transgression, dark desires, and fantastic deviance wonderfully subvert the restrictive orders of reason, utility, and paternal morality” (ibid.: 287). At the present time, indeed, individuals seem unable to imagine a future panorama that is not linked to degradation, darkness and danger; therefore, one of the possible ways, if not the most probable, they consider useful to

find peace is to re-create for themselves a new setting, in which unconventional and supernatural creatures can co-habit without feeling strange and realizing the fear of death.

### **The contemporary vampire: a new representation**

Until a few decades ago, if a common person was asked to think of and describe a vampire, the representation he would have offered would have been far from positive: the archetypal portrayal of bloodsuckers was permanently tied to the concept of evil. They were generally depicted as ugly, repugnant and dreadful figures, whose main occupation was to feed, sucking and drinking human blood. The features of these anti-Christ characters made them automatically be the most feared antagonists within the stories together with ghosts, werewolves and spectres. In regard to this aspect, the prototype of the traditional vampire has been never better conveyed than in one of the most famous of gothic novels, Bram Stoker's "Dracula", in which the solitary Count from Transylvania lived in a sinister and mysterious castle, was unanimously considered an anti-Christ and his evil nature did not permit him to be merciful.

Yet in the second part of the nineteenth century, however, the readers' perception of bloodsuckers was partially modified, in fact, they started to be associated to the idea of sexual satisfaction and transgression absorbing and giving voice the socio-cultural issues of the period: as Botting maintains, the presence of the vampire in a story "signals the barbarities that result from human vanity and scientific illusions" (Ibid.: 93). Parallel to novels dealing with the enquiry on the nature of creation, scientific responsibility and social justice, whose Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" is the first undisputed progenitor, the idea according to which blood-sucking figures mirrored sexual libertinism began taking the precedence over the traditional representation of them: in fact, even if including most of the archetypal characteristics of vampires, the Transylvanian nobleman Dracula can be considered as the first erotic icon represented in the Anglophone literature. Basically, his female preys are not just victims forced into unwillingly submitting to his decision, but they become seduced women who aim at pleasantly fulfilling their seducer's desires. With Stoker's creation, indeed, these alien nocturnal characters "become symbols of forbidden values of sexuality and intimacy" (Auerbach: loc. 1983).

Moreover, as Gordon and Hollinger (1997) explain, throughout the twentieth century "the figure of vampire has undergone a variety of fascinating transformations in response, at least in part, to ongoing transformations in broader cultural and political *mise-en-scène*" (1), so that any boundary between what is considered human and what is categorized as monstrous becomes even more jeopardized and problematised.

As a matter of fact, taken into account novels and audiovisual products of the contemporary times, decomposing, deliquescing, and disgusting entities are absent: vampires have the task to enter the modern society, not as frightening monsters but as metaphorical representations of human darker and more intimate ideals, of human possible and carved life after death. For this reason, artists of the previous century have disarmed and re-contextualised both Gothic fictions and blood-sucking figures, offering new representations lacking horrible traits. Vampires, indeed, clearly represent men's possibility to challenge human sufferings and death.

They detach from the traditional prototype and "they invade the restrictions Stoker's constructs. They are not foreigners; they can go anywhere; their coffin, if it is one, is as large as Western culture" (Auerbach: loc. 1816). The second part of the twentieth century capitulates to the vampire's charisma, fostering an unfamiliar portrayal of vampires in which elegance, intelligence, beauty and charm are the leit-motifs. In regard to this aspect, Gordon and Hollinger (1997) suggest that the process of transformation finds in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* its highest peak: in the film adaptation, produced nearly two decades later, the vampire as commonly known by people ceases to exist, leaving room to a

tempting and irresistible man, who is undoubtedly more intriguing than every-day individuals.

The integration into human society and into human habits involves an inevitable process of humanization that deals with both the external and the internal dimension: the nocturnal species loses its traditional paleness, evil eyes and diabolic smile to present human traits. Moreover, feelings, passions and sufferings directly enter their world: therefore, as for many examples of vampire in films and TV series of the last part of the twentieth century and the early years of the twentieth-first century, they cannot choose but give vent to their problems, thoughts, and anxieties<sup>280</sup>.

As a result, people can mirror themselves in these hypnotising figures, whose main function is to bear the burden of humanity wearing the contemporary man's most intimate and darkest projections. Thus, as pointed out by Sage (1990), citing Mary Shelley, "the imagination is properly a vehicle for escaping the self, not a medium of personal power or even of self-expression" (173).

### **"The Vampire Diaries": when any limit between "human" and "monstrous" disappear**

Based on the book series *The Vampire Diaries* written by the American author L. J. Smith, the TV show of the same name premiered on the American television on September 10, 2009 and it now includes four seasons, the last of which is still on the screens. Taking place in an invented small town called Mystic Falls, the series tells the story of the young vampire brothers Damon and Stefan Salvatore, that, after having spent more than one hundred years far from the place in which they grew up, decide to come back home to try to lead normal lives adapting to Mystic Falls inhabitants' habits. Once they move into the big house they own, they both start living as their peers generally do: they go to school, spend time with friends and meet new classmates. Both brothers are really handsome and charming, so more than one girl is attracted by them; however, Stefan first, then Damon, fall in love with the same female character: Elena Gilbert. She is a very nice girl, who does not resist Stefan's charm and eventually they become a couple. Elena, therefore, discovers the real nature of brothers Salvatore, learning to live with them. Before the ending of the first season, Damon falls in love with Elena too, causing many problems between his brother and the girl. Throughout the following two seasons, Elena, in fact, cannot choose between Stefan and Damon, since the brothers are completely opposite but complementary: basically, Stefan seems to be the good vampire, while his elder brother plays the role of the evil figure. Elena's boyfriend, indeed, fights to resist the temptation to drink human blood by killing innocent people, aspiring to live a common life as the other adolescents generally do. While he often tends to refuse his supernatural existence, his brother Damon is perfectly conscious of what being a blood-sucker means; so, he kills people to feed and he does not feel any kind of human mercy. Although viewers categorize him as the anti-hero of the story, Damon soon presents his *human* side, even more often showing moments of compassion for the individuals he encounters. Contrary to expectations, Damon reveals himself as the most well-balanced brother since Stefan alternates between moments in which he only drinks animal blood in

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<sup>280</sup> Among the others, the most suitable examples taken from audiovisual products to demonstrate the humanization of vampires are those included in the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Moonlight*. Aired from 1997 to 2003, the former tells the story of a young woman who chooses to fight against supernatural forces, such as vampires, demons and spectres but she falls in love with two bloodsuckers: Angel and Spike. Although both of them are charming and clever, the first one represents good, while the other one is the anti-hero of the series. *Moonlight*, instead, includes only one season that ran on the American television between 2007 and 2008. The protagonist, a private investigator, is an elegant and handsome vampire who falls in love with an internet reporter, who helps him to investigate crime. Throughout the episodes the male character reveals his humanity, fighting his evil *brothers* and saving many human lives.

The films that occupy an important position in regard to the ideological transformation of vampires is *The Twilight* saga, in which Edward Cullen and his family are perfectly integrated in the town in which they live: they spend time with the other inhabitants of the place, go to school and mix with their classmates.

darker periods when he loses control becoming “The Ripper” and killing many and many people.

Considered one of the most acclaimed TV series of the last few years<sup>281</sup>, *The Vampire Diaries* fulfil the traditional traits of the gothic fiction: the story, in fact, is set in a solitary place charged with supernatural history, where the town’s politics are decided by some among the most respectable families living in Mystic Falls. Members of the so-called “Founders’ Council”, however, generally hide many scandalous secrets, being, in most cases, werewolves, witches, hybrids and vampires themselves.

The presence of the vulnerable maid is guaranteed too: although Elena Gilbert is a girl of the twentieth-first century, she has a tragic past, being her adoptive parents died in a car crash and having discovered she is the daughter of an evil vampire. Stefan and Damon, therefore, feel responsible for Elena’s life and, once she is in danger they join forces to protect her.

Despite all these “traditional” characteristics tracing back to the Gothic dimension, the TV series clearly aims at representing a modern kind of vampire, who is very similar to those figures presented in the previous paragraphs: Stefan, Damon and all the other bloodsucking characters, in fact, have undoubtedly taken on “the mantle of civilization”, as Gordon and Hollinger (1997:1) would maintain. In fact, although bloodsuckers included in *The Vampire Diaries* share many features with the archetypal representation of vampires, the inclusion of a new kind of nocturnal figures is guaranteed: the American TV series evidently obeys to many of the characteristics identified in both literary and the audiovisual gothic products of the last few decades. The process of domestication of blood-drinkers is *de facto* successful, since they can co-habit with common people without being recognized as supernatural frightening individuals. Vampire brothers Salvatore, as well as the others, do not appear as ugly and horrible living-dead figures, but, on the contrary, they are good-looking and attractive men.

Both Damon and Stefan Salvatore, indeed, embody the vampire every person would aim at becoming: clever, handsome, attractive and elegant. For this reason, they capture the audiences’ sympathy more than ordinary characters can do. Their darkest side, although often revealed throughout the seasons, is not totally seen as something dealing with the lack of humanity; but, on the contrary, it is considered as the right burden they have to bear in order to be immortal. Their sufferings are considered human, and, therefore, they meet viewers’ compassion and acceptance. People do not care about the fact they can feed on human blood and kill innocent individuals, what vampires symbolize, is the break with the traditional boundaries between good and evil, sacred and profane, civilized and barbaric. Vampires of the twenty-first century, therefore, are projections of what human beings would want to become. Life after death seems to be much more appealing than human existence. Metaphorically, in fact, Damon gives vent to his appreciation to Elena’s new identity as a vampire by stating “You know what I think? I have never seen you more alive”<sup>282</sup>.

### **“True Blood”: televising queer vampires**

As stated in the above paragraphs, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century an increasing interest in blood-sucking creatures and vampires has affected popular culture worldwide. The radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature

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<sup>281</sup> As of Autumn 2012, *The Vampire Diaries* has been nominated for sixty-two awards, winning twenty-two: among the others, *The Vampire Diaries* won eighteen at the Teen Choice Awards and two at the People’s Choice Awards proving itself to be one of the most popular TV series of the American television. The female actress, Nina Dobrev, won four Teen Choice Awards, a People’s Choice Award, and the Young Hollywood Award, while Paul Wesley won a Teen Choice Award in 2010 for his role as Stefan Salvatore. Ian Somerhalder, best known as Damon Salvatore, won six awards, including five Teen Choice Awards between 2010 and 2012.

<sup>282</sup> S4xE7.

during the last decades of this century represent the most illuminating outcome of new interdisciplinary approaches that involve the definition of literary and non-literary domains.

Being literature and media studies dynamic and heterogeneous fields, their interrelation “foreshadows” an adventurous perspective of analysis and breadth of application. This moving from the traditional contextualization of vampires in literature to a broader investigation includes a re-definition of its cultural representation through film production and modern media. In this context, HBO’s *True Blood* (Alan Ball, 2008) has met with a massive cult success and is currently airing in America the final episodes of the second season. The TV series, based on the novels by Charlaine Harris, provides a contemporary revision of vampires offering the audience a mishmash of pop blood hunger and overt references to contemporary issues, such as discrimination, homosexuality, drug addiction, religion, quest for identity and influence of the media. *True Blood* TV show is set in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, where vampires live amongst people subsisting on a new synthetic blood, called V, sold in bars and stores. The main characters of the show are a 200 year old vampire, Bill Compton, and Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin), a mind-reading waitress who falls in love with him. In the show, vampires are representative of “otherness” which here relates to sexuality, often to homosexuality; indeed, many episodes present explicit sex scenes leaving little to imagination. As a matter of fact, the TV show brings the sexuality of the vampire back on a more visual level, making it harder to resist. Throughout history, living-dead creatures have always been outsiders in that they looked like men or women but, actually, they were not human. Vampirism becomes in the show a metaphor for outcasts: they do not belong anywhere, yet they try to be part of a world that is often hostile. Thus, the connection between blood-sucking creatures and outcast leads to the presence of a third “ghettoization” relating to homosexuality. Many references in the TV show evoke the presence of homoeroticism as in the case of the sentence uttered by Japanese scientists who created the synthetic blood to let vampires “come out of the coffin”. This statement is a clear pun on the phrase “coming out of the closet”, meaning to reveal one’s own homosexuality. Considering the fact from a different point of view, homosexuals who were previously forced to live their “secret life” underground are now eligible to live as heterosexuals do and, consequently, also blood-sucking creatures can enter the contemporary society and live as “normal human beings”. David Glover and Cora Kaplan<sup>283</sup> state that “homosexuals were forced to go underground, to cut themselves off from the mainstream of the city life, and to exercise much more care and discretion about the ways in which they presented themselves – in other words, to enter the closet” (2009: 123); to a larger extent, this description seems to fit the kind of life that classical vampires were condemned to live, until the present times. Superficially, the comparison seems weak but deconstructing it through a contemporary perspective it does work. Indeed, as Rictor Norton (2008) maintains, “homoerotic desire is seen to be the essence of what is repressed for the sake of establishing bourgeois culture, which is ‘always, already’ heteronormative. Homosexuals who suffer from this repression gain a kind of revenge by demonizing heteronormative relations”(96) as queer vampires in *True Blood* do. Moreover, if we consider the fact that in the Western frame of mind, over the time, the association between race, gender and evil has had a long tradition, the “resurrection” of vampire stories in popular culture is the direct consequence of the adaptation that these supernatural creatures have recently undergone. To this extent, TV shows as *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* aired on-screen convey and, in many cases, promote specific ideologies about race and gender that are the product of a cultural moment that is bound to face the changes within contemporary societies. Indeed, race and gender relations have always had coded depictions but nowadays such TV shows underline more and more the thread that ties them up: the interdisciplinary involvement. This consideration leads to another point to

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<sup>283</sup> D. Glover, C. Kaplan. *Genders*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

ponder over that is the definition of “gender” and “race”. The former, as Glover and Kaplan<sup>284</sup> point out, “is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections (2009:1). The impossibility to define, once and for all, the semantic discontinuity of the term “gender” can be due, in part, to the fact that from the beginning of the nineteenth century on sexuality has increasingly assumed a new role becoming an object of scientific but also of popular knowledge; indeed, as Glover and Kaplan highlight, “what really revolutionized sex was the way in which ideas about sexuality began to spread out and touch every aspect of modern social life”(2009:4). The “evanescence” of the word gender mingles with the concept of “race”. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines this word as “one of the main group that humans can be divided into according to their physical differences, for example the colour of the skin; [...] a group of people who share the same language, history, culture, etc.”<sup>285</sup>. Not surprisingly, the term contains in its definition negative connotations to be found in the explanations “physical differences” and “share the same culture”. On these premises, *True Blood* can be seen as a “audiovisual manifesto” of the contemporary social and racial idiosyncrasies. Indeed, to express the multifaceted interrelation among race and gender, contemporary media go beyond the mere on-screen representation of the issues; far from being an exhaustive definition, *True Blood* portrays a multicultural society, in which reality “seems” to be undercut of racist currents and, at the same time, the same society does fear this “overt” disposition. The outcome that derives from this oscillation between “condemning discrimination and fearing the presence of a multiracial society” reflects, nonetheless, the same behaviour that real (true) societies express. This characteristic can be easily tracked down from the very beginning of the TV show in that the title itself, *True Blood*, contains traces of discrimination whilst apparently evoking equality of races. Amongst its various meanings, the adjective “true” is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “constant, reliable, sure; honest, upright, virtuous” but also “in agreement with the ancestral type; without variation: in phr: to breed true”. In this sense, to breed true matches the idiosyncrasy generated by the intersection between the fight against discrimination and the fear of equality. Indeed, in this latter definition, there should be a pure lineage of vampires whilst others belonging to a “not true bred” category. Therefore, the taxonomy of race brings again the gender issue to the foreground: the terms “true blood” shade and, at the same time, unveil the contemporary paradox according to which homosexuality is both feared as a threat to heterosexual relationships and championed in order to get a social recognition.

As a result, in *True Blood*, the boundary between humans and vampires can be read as a metaphor of the gap still dividing heterosexuals and homosexuals. The parallel that lies beyond this association refers to the fact that vampires suck blood mixing it with the one of their body but, in so doing, they act “against nature”, in the same way homosexual intercoursing have been labelled over the time. The concept of “impurity” is suggested on different occasions in *True Blood* as in the case of Bill, the main vampire, when one of the Afro-American character, Tara, argues: “You don’t know how many people he’s sucked the blood out” (“Strange Love”). Thus, Bill embodies and represents the amalgamation of blood, in other words, impurity. As Abby L. Ferber<sup>286</sup> posits, “interracial sexuality threatens the borders of white identity, mixed-race people become the living embodiment of that threat [...]; the regulation of interracial sexuality is required in order to secure the borders” (2004: 54).

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<sup>284</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>285</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, accessed online (13 August 2013) <<http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/dictionary/race>>.

<sup>286</sup> A.L. Ferber, “Defending the Creation of Whiteness: White Supremacy and the Threat of Interracial Sexuality”, in *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Rethinking*. Heather M. Dalmage. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.



The metaphor of multiraciality in *True Blood* hides another issue that is the inferiority of mixed-race people indeed, notwithstanding the apparent fight against discrimination, yet in the first episode “Strange Love” vampires are in a subordinate position if compared to humans that is the reason why they claim their rights, “We are citizens. We pay taxes. We deserve basic human rights just like everyone else”. Here the reference to gay rights fits the context, juxtaposing two levels of interpretation: on the one hand, in the foreground the vampires’ need to be integrated into the society in which they live. On the other hand, the fight that homosexuals have embarked on to gain equality seems to emerge from the background. This query deserves a closer analysis, in that vampires have officially “upgraded”; as stated in the episode “Strange Love”, vampires do not feed on human blood anymore, so “Now that the Japanese have perfected synthetic blood [...] there is no reason for anyone to fear us [...] we just want to be part of mainstream society. Thus, the main reason for humans to fear blood-sucking creatures has disappeared; thus, the primordial and congenital difference between humans and vampires is no longer a boundary. Is that possible?

Broadly speaking, interracial sexuality represents, to a larger extent, a signal of instability that could threaten the role of supremacy that humans have performed over the time. Therefore, mixed-race sexuality symbolizes a point of rupture in the apparent social balance and equality that the TV show seems to convey. Bill and the other vampires are feared by the local community, as the Afro-American waitress, Tara, argues “Do you know how many people are having sex with vampires these days? And some of them disappear”. Tara’s utterance brings about the fear of juxtaposition of sexuality and race, as if having sexual intercourses with vampires could lead to “disappearance”. As a consequence, the metaphor of disappearing marks the association between sexuality and impurity. An example of how this issue influences the plot of the story can be found in Sookie’s character. Right from the start, Sookie is presented in white clothes to evoke purity. Her role underlines the interaction between her being “white” and “pure” (virgin), so that her whiteness is directly associated to purity and virginity. What makes Sookie dangerous in the structure of the TV show is not the fact that she is a mind-reading fairy; her “difference” lies in the fact that she is a virgin. This point is also noticed by the head chef of the bar, Lafayette, as he tells Sookie “They [men] ain’t scared of you hunny-child. They scared of what’s between your legs”. This statement clearly underlines the power and influence that Sookie “casts” on the people around her as a sort of enchantment. Her purity operates on a double level: on the one hand, it makes her vulnerable because men are eager to seduce her; on the other hand, her preserved virginal appearance influences and forestalls the moves of living beings and blood-sucking creatures. Therefore, both the vampires that people Bon Temps and supernatural characters as fairies become *de facto* the metaphor of the relationship between power and sex that, in its turn, evokes the ambiguity of men’s existence. As Auerbach has argued, “as unnatural actors, vampires represent freedom from activity – even, it seems, from sexuality” (1995:181).

## Conclusion

As remembered above, the unprecedented success that *Dracula* has experienced throughout the years has affected new TV shows on vampires, offering its audience thought-provoking reinterpretations of blood-sucking creatures together with references to contemporary issues such as (homo)sexuality, family relationships, media influence, and racism. Moreover, the past twenty years have seen an increasing surge in undead as a consequence of men’s need to overcome the limits of human life. In this perspective, vampirism has always been categorized and used as a means to articulate encoded categorizations of sexuality, desire and identity ; as D. Jones posits, “we have the vampirism as a metaphor for gender-relations or sexuality, for sexual repression, perversion, or dissidence” (71). To this extent, on-screen TV shows have accomplished the final part of the vampires’ deconstruction to make room to a new supernatural creature. In this process of

reconstruction, the figure of the vampire comes out of the screen and becomes the personification of our innermost desires and aspirations, avoiding any kind of physical or spiritual boundary.

Therefore, the concept of supernatural continues to be a central issue in literary, cultural and media studies, with implications that intersect different disciplinary boundaries, providing challenging debates. With its impressive interdisciplinary coverage, the figure of the vampire offers an ongoing stimulus in cultural media and gender theorization processes paving the path for future, illuminating analysis on contemporary societies. Now, as Michel Foucault (1980: vii) argued, the further question would be “[d]o we *truly* need a *true* sex?<sup>287</sup>”.

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